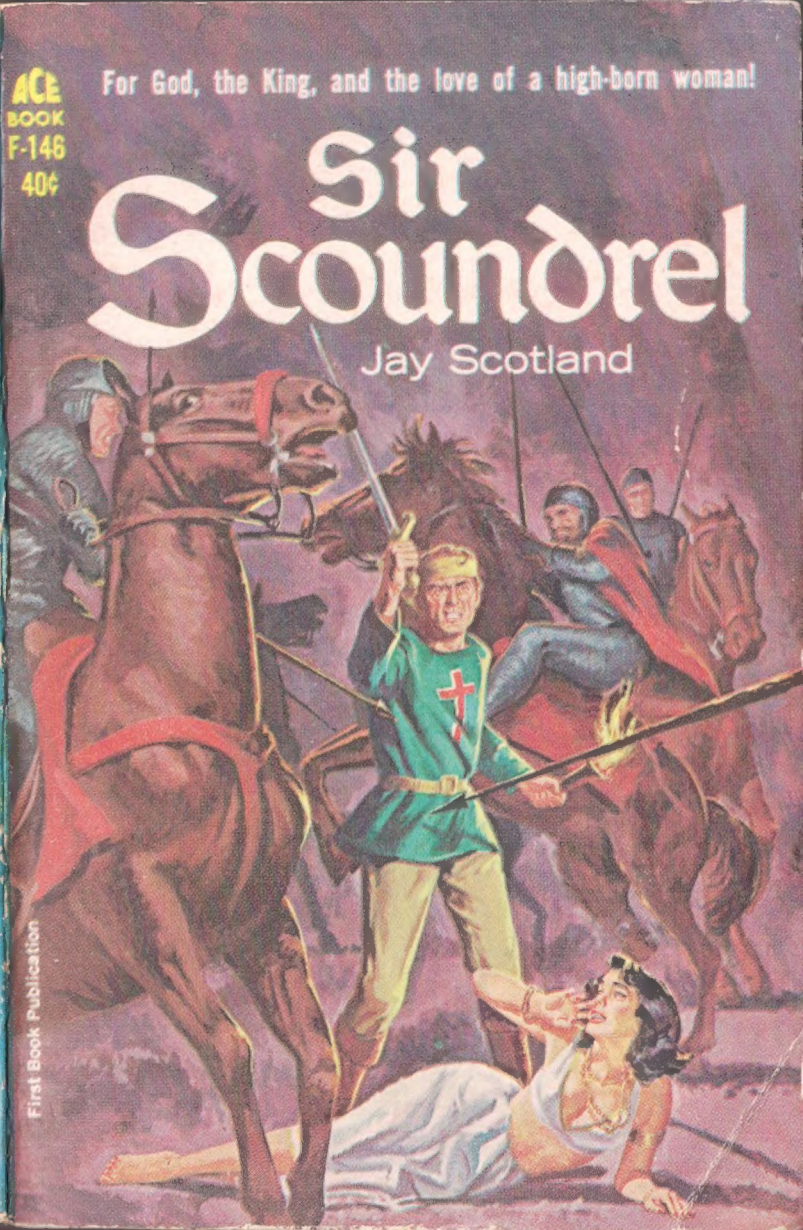
ACE BOOK F-146

SIR SCOUNDREL

Jay Scotland



HIS WITS WERE HIS WEAPONS

"Stand aside. We have business with the woman."

The girl fell into a fresh fit of sobbing.

I said, "The question is, my lord, does she have business with you?"

He laughed. "Are you a knight in rags so to defend her?" One mailed fist dipped and returned holding a powerful *martel de fer* . . . Its point could crush a casque and bite deep into brains. "Have you any weapon like this, gutter knight?"

"Only a tongue with barbs, my lord. But very good for deflating swollen balloons."

SIR SCOUNDREL riots his way through a Crusade and across two continents with his dagger, his lute, and his wit in the service of king, country, and a yellow-haired Lady Disdain.

Author's Note

Of all the legends from the fierce and barbaric Middle Ages, none has persisted with more vigor than that of Blondel, faithful minstrel of Richard the Lion-Heart. Blondel's wanderings in search of his imprisoned master are related, if with skepticism, in most every history of the Third Crusade. Scholars can unearth no facts to support the legend, so consequently they discount it. Automatically this makes Blondel fair game for a tale of adventure.

The reader may wonder what is real and what is invented. A few of the characters—Zoe the washer-girl, Lady Joanna, the evil knight Sturmwulf, Blondel's cousin Rolfe, Toscar the pirate chief of Corfu—are creatures of imagination. The rest—Berengaria of Navarre, Hubert Walter, the wily sultan Saladin, Hugh of Burgundy and all the other monarchs and nobles who came to be Richard's mortal enemies while still serving with him under the Cross—were real people. Even the drug-crazed assassins of the Old Man of the Mountains existed, and behaved as reported. The military actions in the Holy Land mirror accepted records. And finally, the strange secret behind Richard's refusal to marry Alice of France has never been proven a lie. Philip of France must have felt—or perhaps known for certain?—that Richard told the truth about his father and Alice. Else why did he accept Richard's excuse without protest?

But behind the historical truth of Blondel's great search —Blondel really did exist; that much is acknowledged—lies truth of another, equally valid, kind: the truth of intangible values. Faith, loyalty, courage. These, the author likes to think, Blondel had in plenty.

—Jay Scotland

Sir Scoundrel

by

JAY SCOTLAND

ACE BOOKS, INC.
23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N.Y.

SIR SCOUNDREL

Copyright ©, 1962, by Ace Books, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

Dedication

to the memory of
my good friend
Richard Dix,
who first told me the legend
of faithful Blondel.

Printed in U.S.A.

CHAPTER ONE

IT IS NO EASY thing to wake suddenly with a mouth full of moldering black earth and know that you are being buried alive.

A shower of the damp soil of the isle of Cyprus struck me in the face. My stomach churned in violent alarm.

I sat at the bottom of a fresh-dug shallow pit. My wrists were lashed to my ankles with stout rope and covered with a layer of new-turned ground. Upon my back pressed a heavy weight. I did not need to look and see. I already knew it was a dead man.

I struggled against my bonds, buried to my hips in the loam three surly squires were shovelling over me in the starlight. Their rough-clad figures bulked against the harbor's gleam, a lantern-lit splendor that bedecked the sea like a flaming necklace in honor of the wedding of my liege. Over a dark hill, from the direction of the town of Limasol, rose a muffled roar. The sound said the wedding celebration still went forward lustily.

Until now it had been a time for rejoicing. My king's knights had defeated the bandit overlord of Cyprus, Isaac Comnenos, a foolish Greek who tried to extract tribute from the English fleet anchoring to refurbish provisions. In return for his insolence, the petty monarch had been roundly

trounced in battle, the city of Famagusta sacked and its storehouses relieved of much treasure. My king now claimed Cyprus for his own, and to celebrate the victory chose the chapel at Limasol to solemnize his vows with Berengaria of Navarre, daughter of Sancho the Wise. In such a season of high danger and holy hope, I, who had sung or talked or fought my way out of countless scrapes in my nine-and-twenty years was about to have my life snuffed out while bound ingloriously to a ghastly corpse.

"Messires," croaked one of the French squires, "the rascal is stirring."

Stirring I was. I turned my head and gazed a moment into death-glazed eyes, hideously open in the strip of face flesh showing through my dead companion's mailed hauberk. Each time I moved beneath the dirt already heaped upon me, the knight's corpse danced too. I'd gutted his bowels with his own broadsword back in Limasol. His blood had dried stiff on the back of my jerkin.

"Awake, is he?" said a voice out of the dark, courtly and soft yet subtly mocking. The rich accoutrements of armored horses jingled. Hooves thudded. The beasts blew noisily. "Most fitting. Now he can realize he's to die under the laws of his own brutish king. I'd thought you gave him a fatal knock on the head with that ready mace of yours after he killed our brother, Sir Elmon. I'm glad not."

"Your knight deserved killing," I snarled at them. "How noble of him to bait a gentle witless apprentice! This man would have killed my cousin and joglar Rolfe, out of drunken stupidity, had I not struck first. I demand you ease me!"

Towering up, their mailed bodies stood out fearsomely against the lights of the great dromonds and galleys at anchor. Their casques blocked out the stars. Upon each cloak shone dimly the red cross of the crusade, whose holiness was made a mockery by their thirst for revenge. I knew it was not my own person they struck against so much as that of my king, whom they hated.

"Release him indeed!" jeered the first speaker. He dis-

mounted with a clank and crouched beside the pit to scowl. His mail left his face partly in view, a pale, handsome face, but cold and vindictive, with subtle eyes full of craft.

"You'd think we snared the monarch himself! I should lop off your head for impertinence, minstrel. Except that I prefer to watch you suffocate slowly."

"Send for the king!" I cried, trying to sound braver than I felt. In the past, such shows had served me well in escaping many a hostile bedchamber when a husband returned a mite early.

Tonight, however, I had the eerie feeling that my last bed-mate might well be Prince Death himself. Could I possibly twist my lashed hands to reach the Florentine dagger I carried laced to my calf beneath my right boot?

Straining my wrists in the dirt mounded over them, I said again, "I demand you fetch the king! Only he has authority to administer the law in this company."

"What a saucy tongue!" said the subtle-eyed knight. "So you demand, eh? You demand of Hugh, Duke of Burgundy? A low-born singer of rhymed garbage demands? Well, sirrah, the lord of the three English lions will simply have to find another minstrel, since I say this to your damned demands."

And he flung dirt into my eyes.

"Whoresons!" I exclaimed, deeming I had little left to lose. "Miserable French whoresons all!"

"Be silent!" cried another of the knights. "Else I'll crack your head open!"

Hugh, Duke of Burgundy, shook his head sharply.

"No. He shall die slowly. We'll see what clever remarks he can make with his jaws full of maggots."

"The varlet deserves quartering," the knight complained. "Especially since he's of French blood to begin with—"

"Masters, please don't heap still more shame upon me!" I spoke rapidly to hide the frantic stretching of my hands in the dirt as I strained toward the hidden dagger. "Born in Aquitaine, yes. Of a good French couple named de Nesle, yes. But they swore allegiance to my king's father the second Henry, and I also. Don't curse me in the eyes of God before

I die by placing me in company with your wretched monarch."

The Duke's face burned with hate. "Would there were a dozen deaths instead of one for your malicious tongue."

"Brag and bluff, brag and bluff," I chanted, speaking fast and hoping none of the squires leaning upon their earth-tools would notice the shifting of soil near my feet. "Your king Philip Augustus was practically forced to go to the Holy Land by my master. It's common knowledge Philip has no belly for any kind of warfare except the kind conducted behind stairs and under petticoats. Why, he's been at the siege of Acre for weeks now. What's the news? No news! The situation unchanged! He sips wine and wonders what to do and waits the arrival of a truly brave king."

"Law or no law," said Hugh the Duke, "I'll hear no more."

His great broadsword whicked from its scabbard, a white gleam of iron under the stars. The night was suddenly full of the smells of spring and trees a-greening and death.

My straining hand was now scant inches from my calf. I must hold them off but a little longer.

"Don't deny the cowardice of your king, brave gentlemen. Did he protest at all when my liege refused to marry his sister Princess Alice? Even though the lady had been my king's betrothed since he was but five years young in Aquitaine? Even though Alice grew up in Henry's court there? My liege had the courage to wed the woman of his choice, while your yellow-belly king swallowed the insult. The peal of those bells in Limasol today was a mockery of Philip's—"

The tip of Hugh's broadsword pricked my throat.

"Those are your last words."

My fingers worked frantically at my boot, struggling with thick laces bound around my flesh, twisting here, twisting there, to get at the dagger. The broadsword cut more deeply into my neck. The mounted knights urged Hugh to deliver the death-stroke.

I put on a sudden dumb-show of horror, wrenching away so that I fell, together with the corpse, onto my side. My

head faced the Duke, my back was away. Now the dagger was sawing at the thongs between my ankles as I whispered, "All that I said I take back! I look suddenly into death's bony face. I don't want to die!"

"He crawls!" laughed one of the knights. "Like all the English, he crawls!"

"What is a poor mountebank to do?" I whined. "I was flushed with wine, giddy from the applause of hot-eyed Cypriot wenches who applauded my poor ballad celebrating the marriage. When your knight baited my cousin—threatened to smash the cithara the poor fellow crafted for me with his own hands, carving and polishing each scrap of wood for the sound box, winding and tuning each string, hour after hour—I went wild."

The ankle thongs were nearly cut through. One of the squires scuffed idly to the pit rim. I rushed on.

"A poor instrument, my cithara, true. But valuable to a minstrel, my lords. Upon it depends our very lives. We've taken the cross, yes. But we are paid no stipend by our monarch as knights are. We must earn our passage to Jerusalem. When I saw this dead man about to smash my precious instrument and run my cousin through in the bargain—"

"A dagger!" screamed the squire. *"Beware, he has a dagger!"*

In one spring I was free of the fetid corpse and up on the rim of the pit.

"A dagger indeed, for killing bullies!"

I ripped open the guts of the squire with a stab and upward drag of the blade.

Crying for his knights to strike me down, Hugh of Burgundy leaped away from my blade. I had no illusions about living much longer, but at least I would make a fair tally before shuffling to my doom. I darted forward.

Sir Elmon thundered at me, his warhorse snorting. The spiky ball on Elmon's mace whistled past my head. I countered by plunging my dagger to its hilt in his leg, ripping his quilted linen and leather gambeson. Elmon

dropped his mace. I shoved him from the saddle. He fell with a noisy clank. I tore the shield from his left arm.

Slipping my arm through the shield thong, I leaped to horse, turning just in time to divert the thrust of a lance. Behind me another knight cried a curse in French as his broadsword hacked down. Thrusting the shield under the blow, I lost balance and tumbled to earth.

With a clang the shield flew away. Hugh of Burgundy, ahorse again, grazed me with his lance, knocking the Florentine dagger from my grasp. A ring of armored chargers closed in. Hugh raised a glove to signal that he would deliver the *coup de grace*. Flat on my back, I watched his lance-point dip.

Without warning another knight deflected Hugh's lance with his shield.

"Spawn of six hells!" Hugh screamed. "You clumsy—"

"Listen, my lord, listen! Mounted men coming!"

Hugh swung in his saddle, straining after the noise of hoofbeats down the Limasol road.

"Kill him while there's time!" urged a squire.

"Too late, masters, too late!" My voice was jubilant as I spied the splendid animal just thundering over the hill. A handsome bay Arab, the same Fauvel my liege had claimed as a prize of war from Isaac Comnenos. "I'm saved! 'Tis the king!"

Behind that great figure upon the mighty stallion came another rider I recognized, my own mop-haired cousin Rolfe, beating his mule with a stick to keep pace. Moments later the king pulled his charger to a halt at the pit-side.

"By God's teeth, Burgundy!" cried Richard Coeur de Lion. "He is our man. Release him!"

In humiliation and rage Hugh and the other knights climbed from their mounts and bent the knee to him.

"If King Richard please," Burgundy began, "this low fellow slew our knightly companion Sir Polidor. We did not wish to disturb Your Majesty during the wedding banquet. Consequently we took it upon ourselves to punish him ac-

cording to the rules of conduct you yourself established for this crusade."

Richard leaned from the saddle for a view of the grisly ruin in the pit. He still wore his festive garb, leg buskins of rich purple, tunic of rose-hued silken samite. His great sword with its square gold hilt hung from a pearl-sewn baldric. Two-and-thirty years, he was tall, long of arm and hot of eye, the very picture of a monarch.

"This is the knave our minstrel killed, lying in yon pit?" he inquired.

"That is Polidor," answered Hugh with seething deference. "We presumed we were entitled to punish his slayer since Your Majesty decreed that any man striking down another aboard ship should be lashed to his victim and cast into the sea, while death on land was punishable by burial alive, murderer and victim tied together as one. We only thought to carry out—"

"Tell us the circumstances of the death," interrupted Richard. There was little sympathy for me in his stern stare. "We know only what this fellow Rolfe told us when he wakened from a knock on the pate and rushed into the wedding banquet to summon us here."

Hugh of Burgundy sheathed his broadsword with an angry clank and stared morosely into the pit.

"Come, sirrah! Berengaria awaits. Who struck first, Sir Polidor or Blondel de Nesle?"

Burgundy raised a gauntlet to accuse me. "That rogue."

I could stand the falsehoods no longer.

"My lord king, thus far the Duke has made nary a reference to the weapon with which I attacked Sir Polidor—his own sword which he turned against me. Perhaps the Duke means to imply that I fell upon a fully-armed knight convinced I could do him to death with my toes or my fundament?"

A violent flush darkened Burgundy's cheek.

"Your highness, this man's insufferable insolence—"

"Be silent!" said Richard. "A minstrel is allowed a certain

free play of speech. Speak to us no more in cloudy words, Burgundy. Who struck first, and with what?"

Overcoming terror which doubtless gripped him in the presence of the king himself, Rolfe scuttled forward, cap in hand. He bent knee quickly and said with moon eyes downcast:

"May it please Your Highness, my cousin was performing for the crowd in the inn yard. The dead knight demanded to examine the cithara I made for my cousin with my own hands. When I would not release the instrument, Sir Polidor, being inflamed with wine, drew his sword—"

"And I gutted him," I said, "since he was about to do the same to Rolfe."

In stern rebuke Richard said, "Your tone of pride over slaying another is onerous, Blondel. Remember Him whose sepulcher we sail to liberate."

I stepped back as though struck in the face.

Was this the same lion of a man with whom I'd wrestled and sung and tilted lances during our youth in Aquitaine? I well knew that the weight of the crown of England and this holy crusade wore heavily upon him. But so heavily as to wipe out in a few curt words all the comradeship that had existed between us for so long?

Turning without ceremony to Hugh, Richard fixed him with a blazing eye.

"Come, good Duke, don't deceive us. Did Polidor bait and threaten to slay Blondel's joglar?"

"He may have acted in unseemly haste," Hugh hedged.

Richard raised a mailed hand.

"No more. We see our answer on your face."

The Duke stepped forward defiantly. "You cannot succor a low-born scoundrel!"

"Before the God we serve, all men receive equal justice."

"But I tell you it was purest murder!"

"When you refuse to deny Blondel used any weapon besides Sir Polidor's own sword?" Richard snorted. "Don't tease our brain with foolishness, Duke. It appears to us the matter is closed. We command this expedition, not your

liege Philip. He awaits us at Acre, having already sailed from Genoa. You, Burgundy, and your knights, have joined us as Philip's representatives, to consult with us when necessary and give us your lord's view on matters of strategy. In such a circumstance you're honor-bound to subject yourselves to our discipline and decision."

"So far there's been precious little of that consultation your highness mentions," mumbled Burgundy. "We might be a pack of jackals for all the courtesy we're accorded. I hope I'm forgiven for saying forthrightly that King Philip won't welcome his servants being relegated to the status of lackeys."

With a heavy sigh Richard told him, "King Philip scarcely demonstrated his skill in combat. We have said the same to his face. Don't pursue the subject. As to yon dead knight, have your squires bear him to the chapel for the priests. I find Blondel blameless."

But Richard's eyes, burning down upon me in the spring dark, did not.

Burgundy's boot reached out to indicate the gutted squire. "The minstrel also slew—"

"Silence! Take your dead from our sight and yourselves as well."

With glances of resentment that promised revenge, the French knights and squires bundled the two bodies in cloaks and jogged off down the road to Limasol, the distant song and mirth an ironic backdrop for their gloomy passing.

I dropped to my knee.

"My king, I thank you."

Richard waved his hand absently, speaking without the royal plural, "Saving your skin will cost me dear, Blondel." He transfixed me with a strange, pained glance whose import I could not fathom. "I have already alienated Philip by refusing to marry Princess Alice. There were reasons in plenty for that refusal. Alice is nine years older than I, and blamed ugly to boot. But my father Henry II managed to find her charming when she was at our court, and dallied with her, to the shame of my mother. Because there was offspring of that union—"

Unhappiness lay upon him as he paused and brooded. Rolfe clutched my sleeve, sensing the king's displeasure.

"—because of that I refused to complete the marriage arranged when I was five. I married Berengaria instead. But in so doing, I know I enraged Philip. And he is a small, spiteful man. Surely you comprehend, Blondel. Philip and I are partners in this holy crusade to free Jerusalem from Saladin's host. And Philip is none too strong an ally as it is. To anger him by forcing me to rise to your defense in what is, at best, a murky situation—"

"I did not beg to have my life saved!" I said hotly.

Richard stared at the stars, still oddly pained.

"Not in words. No, not in words, that's true."

"If I have caused the king anguish—"

"Blondel, we are no longer children! We are grown men! When we were young in Aquitaine, it was the time for pranks and foolishness. But there is more to life than playing the rogue. When I took the cross I realized that there is far more to life than music and mead and whoring."

Slowly his magnificent head turned past the bobbing lights of the fleet, toward Jerusalem somewhere over the night's horizon.

"I seek my life's destiny in liberating the sepulcher of Christ. I grow impatient with you, Blondel. Mock this high journey no more with your frivolous ways."

Thick hurt stiffened my tongue as I looked up at him in the starlight.

"If you feel so, why did you bother to save me?"

Hesitation then, and peculiar unease. "Perhaps because I feel there is better in you than the making of light songs."

"If so," I replied emptily, "I have not discovered it. I fear I never will. I am what I am."

"In the Holy Land you may feel differently. You may—" He snatched up his bridle. "Enough. Berengaria is still waiting. We sail from Cyprus on the morning tide."

He went hammering up the dark road to Limasol, Fauvel a bay ghost on the night wind. Looking round to my frightened and ungainly cousin I found myself saying, with

a peculiar catch in my voice, " 'Tis a grim thing when the years break a friendship."

Rolfe nodded, moon-eyed, awed. He knew what had happened between the king and me. Tonight I had made enemies, dangerous ones. But far worse, it appeared I had lost the esteem of the one man in the world I revered.

I retrieved my dagger from dirt, laved it to my calf and climbed up behind Rolfe upon his mule. We clopped over the hill toward the joyful city, two fools riding a third.

CHAPTER TWO

NEXT DAY, the thirteenth of May in the year of Our Lord 1191, the English fleet of two hundred square-sailed dromonds departed Cyprus for the Holy Land.

The sky was fair that morning, a heart-shattering crystal blue, cloudless and warm. A brisk wind belled the mighty sails of the dromonds slipping one after another from the harbor ahead of the four galleys cromprising Richard's personal fleet. The fair wind augured well for this third and, hopefully, final crusade.

Soon after dawn Rolfe and I swung down to the quay. Our only baggage was hose and jerkin, boot and cap, and the softly-gleaming cithara hung over my cousin's massive shoulder.

My spirits lifted as we hurried through the crowd. From across the harbor blew the tangy stink of the dromonds carrying the war horses. Cries rose from other dromonds

aboard which engineers were securing dismantled siege engines for the long voyage. Everywhere gulls wheeled, pennants bearing the white cross of the English fluttered out, armor gleamed and sailors cursed at hawse-ropes.

We passed companies of loyal French knights recruited from Richard's lands in Aquitaine and Normandy. There were also troops of gentle Hospitallers, skilled in healing arts, responsible in battle for the wounded. And grim Knights of St. John with forbidding black cloaks stitched with five white crosses to represent the five wounds of Christ. And Templars, in snowy mantles upon which the red cross burned like fire. It was a stirring spectacle for a poet too low-born to ever be a part of such noble ranks.

Rolfe whistled merrily as we neared the quay, caught up in the stir and clank of an army of two hundred thousand Christians embarking. I could not quite match his high good humor. I had lain awake on my pallet most all night, speculating on the cloudy riddle of my own destiny while the drinking and carousing in the palace of defeated Isaac Comnenos roared on.

In the lonely time before dawn, when wild terns hooted over the harbor and the moon loomed among lonely cloud-battlements, I had wondered about the puzzle of himself each man must one day unravel.

Such ponderous concerns were troublesome and new to me. I had been content up till then for my head to be a catch-all of rhymes and tunes and good memories of the gentle sun of Aquitaine over the bailey of the castle of Henry II of England. There, Richard, Rolfe, and I had been raised.

We might have been three brothers. We wrestled and jousted and discussed knowingly which serving girls would receive lovers and which wouldn't. We cupped steaming bowls of leek soup at the hearth in the cottage belonging to Rolfe's mother on long winter afternoons when Richard had been freed of the ministration of his tutors. It was a fine life, growing up in the protective shadow of Henry and his fiercely proud queen, Elinor of Aquitaine.

In those days I hardly considered Richard the destined king of a land I had never seen, only as my good companion. Nor did I chafe when he out-wrestled me, or proved himself more powerful upon a charger, because I soon discovered I was the more agile, and perhaps quicker with words as well.

My parents, so Rolfe's mother said, had been villeins of the castle, my mother dying at my birth, my father soon after. Rolfe himself was slow, often abused by the almoners, yeomen of the ewery and other castle flunkies. I took his part often, and surprised myself by earning Richard's praise in the bargain. Curiously, as I began to grow more skillful in making up the verses so rich a part of the troubadour tradition of Aquitaine, and found myself invited not infrequently into the great hall to perform for Elinor and Henry from behind the stone-tracery of the minstrel's gallery, cousin Rolfe seemed to fall in a most natural way into a new role, that of my servant, my apprentice, my joglar. Though he was the elder, he seemed perfectly content to accept the lesser role, and even grew angry the few times I wondered about the oddness of the relationship. Soon I too accepted it without further comment.

As Richard grew, and I also, we naturally tended to draw somewhat apart. He and his younger brother Prince John, a surly and mean-tempered youth I gave wide berth, were constantly riding hither and yon in Aquitaine and Normandy, accompanied by bands of their knights, settling this quarrel or that arising out of the fact that their father, ruling England, also ruled wide areas of France as well. At this stage I was almost a man, and not one jot dissatisfied that the only talents I seemed to possess were a facility with language and a propensity for landing in trouble. In truth, my slim talents pleased me. A minstrel was accorded far more privilege than was granted to even the most fortunately-placed of the low-born.

So while Richard was away longer and longer, Rolfe and I took to the roads, the lovely roads of France that lead to the Seine and the Rhone and the Moselle and beyond. At

every castle I sang and learned new rhymes, and our life was one golden adventure, full of warm, willing wenches and tavern brawls, hearty laughter and the taste of fermented honey on the tongue.

Then, four years ago, in 1187, had sounded the dreadful thunderclap.

Thousands of Christian knights dead upon the Plain of Tiberias in the Holy Land. Sultan Saladin uniting his scattered empire. The sacred relic-wood of the True Cross fallen into his hands, and the ports of Acre and Jaffa and Sidon as well. In October of that year the garrison in Jerusalem surrendered and Pope Urban III, so the couriers said as they carried word from castle to castle, died of a broken heart.

I later learned that Richard heard the dreadful news one winter night at Tours, and next morning took the cross and swore his holy vows before Bartholomew, bishop of that city.

Rolfe and I continued our aimless wanderings through France. Newly-crowned after his father's death, Lion-Heart was in England, selling every piece of royal property and preferment he could lay hand on, to equip a new army to retake the Holy City. Some railed at his cold-bloodedness in throwing even royal offices and royal decisions in legal suits upon the auction block. Richard was reported to have said that if a purchaser could be found, he would sell London itself.

The financing was a long, laborious process, not completed until early in this year of 1191. The great army, formed of that uneasy alliance between the English and Philip of France, set sail, the French from Genoa, the English from Marseilles a little later in the spring. Richard reluctantly left his sickly brother John to rule England in his stead.

The lure of the crusades sang a siren-tune to me. Weary of France, eager for new sights in new lands, Rolfe and I journeyed south on foot to Marseilles and there took the crusaders' vow. The king, whom I had seen only intermittently over the past few years, greeted me warmly enough, and at once invited me to travel with him on his great red

galley, which sailed with the three other galleys making up his personal armada, at the head of the fleet. I did not hesitate.

But lying upon my pallet in the house of Isaac Comnenos, wondering upon the mystery of life in the moon-shot dark, thinking upon the words of my liege after he saved my life, I realized that a fresh and disturbing note had entered our relationship. I was still Blondel, the minstrel, the prankster. I had not changed. But Richard had. He was a great king, with power of life and death in his hands. His head, I reasoned, must now be filled with exalted thoughts.

What, then, was the trouble with me?

In my heart I admitted the crusade was but an excuse, a chance for excitement, a welcome relief from boredom. To others—finely-caparisoned knights, and engineers, and merchants travelling with the company, even a dromond-load of giggling whores of every hue and description—it was a profit-making enterprise. That did not excuse me. It merely heightened the dissatisfaction with myself Richard's words had stirred.

Was that my fate? To be a mere singer of songs? Could a man ask for no better than that?

I could not hope to enter the ranks of chivalry. But as I swung along next to Rolfe down the noisy quay that morning, and saw gleaming ahead the scarlet sails and deck awnings of Richard's own galley, I thought that perhaps in the Holy Land, as we came to the relief of the Christians who had besieged the port of Acre for two long and unsuccessful years, perhaps there, as the king had hinted, I might find a better and a higher purpose.

Putting off these grim thoughts, I looked ahead. I gripped Rolfe's arm, a smile coming on my face.

"Look, cousin. Yonder, just boarding the galley. What a sight she is!"

In the hot sunlight Rolfe blinked.

"That small, pale, black-haired woman?"

"No, you handsome oaf you, not the little ivory elf in baudekin. That's Berengaria."

Again my cousin blinked and scratched his pate. "Ah,

that's right. Somehow I forgot." He smiled in his mooning way.

"I'm talking of the one behind her. The stunning doxy with yellow hair. What a magnificent gown! Golden samite burns like the sun. And what flesh it conceals! Rolfe my lad, it's a wonderful morning."

He grunted. "Don't be love-struck. I'd venture she's nobly born."

"Of course she is. That's Lady Joanna Pembroke, from England. Elinor brought her across the channel before she fetched Berengaria to Marseilles to marry the king. That was before Elinor returned to Aquitaine, you understand."

The shoes of the yellow-haired beauty, tiny shoes of softest leather, without heels, peeped from beneath her gleaming gown as she climbed aboard the galley. I sighed. Rolfe said:

"I only undertand that when you get such a calf stare in your eye, Blondel, you make yourself appear silly. Or you fall into a fight. Or both. Ah, but she is a handsome girl, isn't she? No one would ever mistake her for that other—ah—what's her name?"

"The Queen, the Queen. Berengaria. Lady Joanna's as fair as her highness is dark."

"Where's her husband?" Rolfe inquired, peering around in the crowd.

"Long dead, the old spindle-shanks. Very rich, I hear. He widowed Lady Joanna when she was only eighteen. She can't be more than twenty now. And no one to comfort her as she fulfills the lonesome task of handmaiden to a queen!"

"You certainly went to some pains to learn all about her."

"I certainly did. I spied her first in Marseilles."

"Is a handmaiden lonely?" Rolfe wondered. "They seem to be giggling like schoolgirls."

He referred to the group of comely young women, Norman and Saxon, with a brace of sloe-eyed beauties of Navarre mixed in for spice, gathered around Berengaria under the scarlet awnings at the vessel's stern. Sailors scurrying up the masts and over the deck took care to behave respectably. So did Hubert Walter, a bearded Saxon in a thick jack-coat of canvas laced over iron breastplates. A burly man with a

great beefroast of a face, Walter was reputed to be a fierce fighter. He was the king's military aide.

After paying a quick courtesy visit to the ladies, Walter rushed back to the lower deck to supervise the two tiers of oarsmen, while the vessel's captain saw to loosing the anchor ropes.

The quary was virtually deserted now, except for a few followers of the beaten Isaac Comnenos, curious to glimpse the English monarch. From the lion pennon flying at the galley's stern, I gathered that Richard was already aboard and in his quarters.

I continued to stare raptly toward the awning. "Hurry, in the name of God, cousin!" Rolfe pleaded. "Let's get aboard or we'll be stranded among these fiendish Greeks."

"Grim thought," said I as we hurried up the plank. "Especially when such charming company awaits us. Follow me and we'll introduce ourselves."

Blanching, Rolfe whispered, "Cousin, don't be hasty! We don't dare approach!"

"Of course we do. A minstrel fool may be permitted to go anywhere because he's not bright, didn't you know that?"

Leaving the astonished Rolfe to totter after me with the cithara in his meaty hand, I scaled the ladder with two quick bounds, swept off my cap and bent my knee to the queen.

"Good morrow, Your Highness. Lovely day for a voyage."

Berengaria's ivory face shone with gentle laughter.

"Who is this? An imp from some Saracen perdition?"

"No, my lady. Your humble servant lives a devilish existence only in the company of others of his gender. In the presence of fair ladies, he is most gentle and pliable. Up to a point," I added with eyes downcast.

Berengaria's wits were sharp. She caught the coarse and courtly jest, laughing well. I felt the creak of the deck and heard the snap of sails as the galley pulled away from the quay with the rowers straining. But as I strutted before the queen and that delicious dozen, I really saw but one of them—Joanna Pembroke.

Her oval face, her gray eyes the shade of autumnal hazel, her shining shoulders and perfect young breasts rising from her boned gown of samite, struck a chord within me whose beauty was nigh to agony. Always a sentimental fellow over beautiful women, the stabbing sentiment this high-born English girl roused in me when first I spied her in Marseilles returned to torment me now. She was lovelier than any woman I'd ever seen.

Her smile was properly polite, but properly empty of feeling as well. I'd sung many a pastorela bemoaning the fate of the rustic lover who pines for a lady above his station. Now those fanciful songs assumed a sharp, more painful meaning.

"Isn't this the king's fool, my lady?" Joanna murmured to Berengaria.

"Ah, yes, so it is," replied the queen.

I made a courtly bow to conceal my heart's hammering.

" 'Tis a boon to be recognized."

Berengaria's dark eyes warmed. "Your name is Blondel. You are the man with whom our lord grew up in Aquitaine. He's spoken of you. Since we sailed from Marseilles, I regret we've had no time to greet you in person."

"A clever and cunning low rascal, I hear," Joanna said brightly. Her words stung like whips. "A very witty singer of wistful songs. We have every other manner of person on this pilgrimage. I suppose we need our complement of those dedicated to frivolity as well."

I wanted to reach out and strike her face. Rolfe saw it, and dropped the cithara in confusion. I caught it and struck the strings. A humming note vibrated in the morning air. Ahead of the red galley, pulling through the fleet to take the lead, the great sea stretched unruffled blue. Its awesome immensity, and the tinkling laughter of the women, Joanna's harmlessly-intended words most of all, made me realize what a complete simpleton I was for parading so, for trying to impress the women when they knew quite well what I was—a gutter songster.

Still, I would not retire in humiliation.

"What shall it be, ladies? A morning song? Perhaps a canzo? Or joc partit?"

Joanna started, gazing past me. A voice said, "It shall be nothing, minstrel."

I turned. There, eyes unpleasant, one beringed hand on his broadsword hilt, stood Hugh, Duke of Burgundy.

At his shoulder was a scurvy-faced squire with a stained jerkin and a bowl hair-clip. This goblin too leered in open antagonism. His grubby fingers hovered a few inches from his dirk.

"My lord," I said, bowing to Burgundy, "of course I have no desire to intrude. But since I requested the queen's permission to sing, the queen must say yea or nay."

"Perhaps a length of steel can say—"

He saw the eyes of Berengaria and her handmaidens fixed upon him and suddenly lifted his hand free of his sword. In horror I saw Lady Joanna look upon him with an expression of passion that tinged her cheeks with pink.

Burgundy slid his eyes over her face, smiling quickly. So Joanna loved this surly cur, did she? He knew it, too. Revelled in the power of it. But quick to recover, he turned to the queen and told her, "Naturally, my lady, if you wish to hear this fellow perform, hear him you shall. However, I come from the king's quarters. He requests your presence at table."

Burgundy extended a jewelled hand. Berengaria grasped it as she rose.

"Another time, minstrel."

She smiled and swept past with her maidens on her heels.

The Duke lingered a moment, his squire glowering nearby. I saw Joanna touch the Duke's arm as she passed. I felt secretly humiliated.

Handing the cithara to wide-eyed Rolfe, glad for the feel of the Florentine dagger laced against my calf, I said softly:

"What is your pleasure, good Duke?"

"My pleasure is for you to keep out of my sight the remainder of this voyage."

"That will be difficult, my lord. The galley is only so large."

With a glance at his squire he said, "Perhaps Ponti and others in my retinue can arrange more suitable quarters for you." His gaze roved over the rail with unmistakable meaning. "Something slightly more comfortable. And permanent, befitting a fool."

I allowed myself the luxury of a laugh.

"My lord, a dog recognizes and never mounts another of his kind. In similar fashion, I wonder how a fool can be recognized, except by another—"

"Ponti!"

The squire slithered forward, dirk drawn. I prepared to defend myself, only to hear Hubert Walter bawl from the deck:

"My lord Duke! The king awaits your pleasure."

Burgundy wheeled and stalked away. Ponti clacked his dagger back to its sheath, picked a mote of dust from his filthy jerkin, sniffed and followed his master.

When the two had disappeared below decks, the stout Walter followed them, stopping a moment to call softly to me:

"Have a care, minstrel. I know of you. And of Burgundy's wrath after last night. Only the king's favor protects you. Don't tempt fate. Stay low until we reach Acre."

With that, he vanished.

Rolfe and I stared at one another. A cloud floated across the sun. A great brazen horn sounded from the bow, signalling the dromonds of the fleet. Cyprus was only a smudge in our wake.

Rolfe did not need speak. We both knew I'd overstepped, and been reminded once again of my own low station.

Cursing furiously, I went below to seek our quarters.

I stayed below a great deal in the succeeding days, sullenly brooding in the cramped quarters provided for Rolfe and me. The fleet plowed on through the brassy sea. May turned to burning June, tar blistering up between the deck

planks with a hot reek. I remained content to lie abed half-sotted with wine, making up foolish songs and tormenting myself with visions of Joanna. The few times I ventured on deck, I had glimpses of Joanna in company with Hugh of Burgundy. They strolled arm in arm, chatted, heads together, limned against a sunset or a dawn. I refused to believe a man of his spiteful stamp could match or serve her young passions, but she was apparently deeply in love with him.

As deeply, as fully as stupidly as I, Blondel, had fallen in love with her.

Mental romance soon palls. The cry of the flesh is strong. One night the fleet anchored a scant mile off the port of Beyrout, on the mist-shrouded Lebanese coast. The port was Saracen-held, but we could make an anchorage with impunity since a naval force was one resource Saladin did not command. I could endure the tormenting ache no longer. The whore dromond was too far on the other side of the fleet. So ignoring Rolfe's admonitions, I slipped down the hawse rope in the dark and swam the mile to the harbor bar in the fetid mist.

Sneaking through the streets and dodgint the Saracen watch, I soon located a dark lantern signifying a brothel, where my Christian mien produced no questions and my meager purse bought me a welcome from a bony but animated Circassian wench.

Though I had visited such establishments before, with frequently delightful results, I slipped through the mist on my way back to the harbor feeling confused, cheapened and less than a man. I paid only passing heed to a great three-masted vessel whose yellow sails drooped ghost-like in the fog and whose decks were a-swarm with turbanned men. I heard a clatter of horses' hooves on planks and a rattle of oaths in a strange tongue. A Lebanese trader, no doubt, I thought to myself, awaiting the departure of the Christian fleet to sail out again and conduct business as usual. I promptly forgot the docked ship as I slipped off the stone

quay into the chilling water and swam the distance to the red galley.

On the following day, several hours after we weighed anchor, I was lying idly on the near-deserted deck, toying with the cithara. Abruptly a hail went up from the mast.

"Foreign vessel! Foreign vessel, masters!"

With others I ran to the rail to observe a high-decked craft plowing far ahead of us to the south, off the sere brown Lebanese coast. She had slipped past the entire fleet, no hard trick since the mist had not burned off till mid-morning. My memory jogged. Richard and Hubert Walter came on deck, hastily consulting with the captain.

"A possibility she's Genoese," offered the captain. "They trade in these waters. They've been supplying the Christians as Acre with provisions."

"Genoese?" echoed Walter. "With those yellow sails? That's no Genoa merchant or I'm a—"

"By God's legs!" Richard flung up a hand. "They've hoisted a flag!"

Hubert Walter shielded his eyes.

"A pennon black as the devil's heart. That's Saladin's banner!"

He turned in consternation to the king.

"My lord, she must have slipped from Beyrout during the early morning. She'll outrun us."

I presented myself quickly before the king.

"Your Highness, I was on shore in Beyrout last night—"

He fixed me with a furious gaze. "What's that you say?"

"A mission of the flesh, sire," I replied, trying to ignore his grimace of weary disgust as I hurried on: "I saw that same vessel tied up on the quay. Or at least the general configuration is the same, three masts, yellow sails and a high stern castle. I thought nothing of it at the time. I recall now hearing hooves, as though she were loading—"

Richard flew into a transport of rage. "You heard them loading animals? And thought nothing of it? Minstrel, don't you know Guy de Lusignan has been besieging Acre for more than two years? That Saladin himself is camped on

the hills behind Acre, besieging Guy in turn? The success or failure of the siege depends on whether the Saracens in the city garrison can be supplied by sea. Yonder vessel probably carries soldiers, mounts, arms, stores. If only you'd spoken up last night instead of going whoring—!"

His rage prevented further speech. Hubert Walter rushed to the captain.

"We must catch her! We've sweeps as well as sails. Pull away, you sorry substitutes for oarsmen! Pull away and catch her before she escapes!"

Richard ran to the bow for a glimpse of the retreating Saracen. Gradually the red galley left behind the rest of the Christian fleet, racing down the coast in pursuit of the enemy. But the enemy was likewise swift. Whether we could catch her was highly uncertain.

Once more I had managed to widen the gap between myself and the king. I stood in torment, unable to tear my gaze from that distant flying scrap of yellow sail.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CHASE continued for the better part of an hour.

Now there would be a widening of the gap between our red galley and the Saracen, now a closing, depending upon the whim of breeze and the ebb and flow of strength in the sweat-streaked backs of the rowers manning our double tier of oars. The captain would have tried the lash to force greater speed from the unfortunates toiling at the oar benches,

but Richard stormed to the walkway, tore the lash from his hands and cast it overside.

He stalked back and forth on the plank between the rowers, exhorting them to pull harder for God, for the Pope, for England, for the Holy Land, their mothers, bastard children, wives and dogs. The rowers applied themselves to the sweeps with lunatic fervor, their palms blistered and bloody and their backs near to snapping. Groans and moans arose from the stinking tiers, but still they pulled harder.

Walter was supervising the run-out of the iron-beaked ram at the bow. He raised a sudden cry of hope. The galley had again closed the distance. Since the rest of the Christian fleet had fallen so far behind, it would be one against one.

"Wretched odds at that," Walter complained. "She must be loaded with several hundred men."

Scanning our company, most of whom had assembled upon the deck to watch the action, Richard showed uncertainty and displeasure. The oarsmen could not be released for fighting. That left but a small crew, only Richard's private retinue, a couple of dozen or more next to useless servants, and the French knights. The sailors who must maneuver the galley completed the company.

Had we not drawn so far from the body of the fleet we would have enjoyed the aid of full fighting crews on Richard's three other war galleys at the head of the convoy. But they were practically out of sight now.

"Catch her for us, captain!" bellowed Richard. "We'll trust God to aid our cause."

"I'd sooner trust a score of stout shields," Walter muttered. "Look at that horde of howling devils lining her rail!"

As our rowers drove themselves frantically and we closed with the enemy, hideous cries of *Allah! Allah Akbar!* smote our ears. Beneath the awning Queen Berengaria and her women turned pale.

With Rolfe at my heels I rushed forward to lend a hand to Walter's men securing the ram in place with hemp and chains. Ripping off my jerkin, panting and sweating, I fell

to, paying no heed to splinters stabbing my hands and turning my palms bloody. Just as we secured the final chain, a strangled cry went up from the helm.

A bolt from a Saracen crossbow stuck from the dead helmsman's throat.

Immediately the air became thick with the buzz and whistle of those fearsome bolts. A black rain of them arched from the Saracen's rail, chunking wood, stabbing flesh, ripping sail.

A bolt grazed my shoulder, puncturing the guts of a sailor just behind me. His blood turned the deck slippery. An oarsman rose up, clawing the sky, one of the bolts imbedded in his spine. Hubert Walter took the helm, unmindful of the whizzing death all about. Richard shouted for the women to go below.

The Saracen captain maneuvered skillfully, presenting his high sterncastle to our bow, making it impossible for us to ram with much success. From that stern, however, hundreds of Saracens could loose crossbow darts and rain javelins and rocks and even wine cups down upon us.

Our galley slid closer. The Saracen captain swung upwind at the last moment. Our ram-beak slid off her castle with a grinding gouge that did little more than scar planks.

Almost directly overhead the Saracens released another destructive hail of fire. Fully a quarter of the oarsmen died screaming, their benches awash with gore. Richard raced through that shower of death to the helm, thrust the wounded Walter aside—a bolt had pierced his jack-coat—and hauled the tiller over.

Richard bellowed oaths at the screaming Saracens as the red galley fell away out of range. Seeing that he had fended off the first attack, the Saracen captain hauled his vessel about and prepared to fly down the coast. Richard scanned the northern horizon. If we could only delay the Saracen until the three war galleys came within range!

The king sent two wounded fellows scuttling for the hemp chests. Soon a dozen coils of the stuff were piled at the mast.

"Twelve stout men!" Richard cried. "Where are they? Twelve men for St. George and England, powerful swimmers!"

"God's mercy, sire!" Walter protested. "You'll send them to certain death!"

"The only means of halting the Saracen is to make her lose way! Lash up her rudder so she won't answer helm. Then we can ram her. Bring us around near her sterncastle again, Walter."

"Madness," complained his wounded aide, obeying nevertheless.

Seeing that none had responded to his plea, Richard stormed to the blood-slippery deck, searching our faces.

"What? Is there no man willing to die for God?" Holy zeal flamed in his eyes, shaming us for hesitating. "By the heels of the Almighty! The Saracen is already riding the wind away from us. Walter, crack on the sail! Have I shipped a company of cowards?"

Deliberately avoiding the king's gaze, I caught up a hemp coil, threw it over my shoulder and walked to the rail.

I was not pleased at the thought of dying in the water at the Saracen's stern. But I had lost too much of the king's respect already to be swayed by reason. Presently I heard a shuffling of feet. Ere long, nine others, each with a coil, stood beside me.

Richard rejoined Walter at the helm. My attention was seized by Burgundy standing among his knights. The Duke was issuing instructions to Squire Ponti. This rascal snatched the last rope coil, stripped off his tunic and unsheathed his dirk, holding its cutting edge forward between his teeth. Perhaps Burgundy had ordered his man into the water as a sop to his own cowardice. Perhaps also—Ponti's eyes met mine, flat, ugly, then glided away—Ponti had another mission. My palms turned cold.

The rowers layed on, spurred by Richard's oaths, even the half-dead and wounded pulling. Our beak-ram quested toward the Saracen broadside. As we drew in range the heathens began to fire their crossbows again.

To prevent ramming, the Saracen captain again presented the stern. Our band of rope carriers crouched at the rail, bolts of death rustling inches from us, the fear-sweat of our bodies a malodorous reek. Ponti was watching me closely.

Well, my hands would be my only weapons against him. I had stripped to the buff, as had the others. Ropes were encumbrance enough. Only a few, like Ponti, carried daggers. I had laid mine aside with my clothes before I saw the squire join the group. There was no time to retrieve it.

"Into the water!" came Richard's cry. "Cripple the Saracen for St. George and England!"

We sprang to the rail. For a moment it seemed my feet would not work properly. I teetered between sea and sky, over my head a dreadful vision of the Saracen's looming castle aswarm with men, all shrieking to Allah and firing crossbows. The man on my left took a dart straight in his mouth and pitched overside with a hideous scream of agony. I leaped.

The sea, crashed over my head and pulled me down. My legs became entangled in rope drifting about the body of the man shot on the rail. My lungs ached fiercely. The coil on my shoulder weighed heavy as sinner's guilt.

I stroked to the surface through the bluegray chill of the heaving sea. A blackish cloud swam before my eyes. I broke into the air, kicking off the last slimy tentacle of the dead man's hemp in time to see another comrade go under, skull smashed by a heavy stone thrown from above. The black cloud widening on the sea was his blood leaking out his ears.

Saracen shrieks split the air as I thrashed toward the great wooden rudder. The enemy had guessed the plan. They directed all their fire straight down at the nine swimming men.

Then at the eight.

Then at the six. And the four.

I swam on through the rain of spears and iron-tipped death. The water all about was black with blood. Corpses and hemp strands floated everywhere.

With aching arms I crashed against the Saracen's stern, momentarily protected by the outward slope of the castle.

Three of us remained alive, sucking breath into tortured lungs as we clung to the great rudder for a moment's respite. The waves, nauseously cold, half-drowned me in salt spray. Through water dripping off my eyebrows I recognized Ponti. He had not loosed his clenched teeth. He still carried the dirk between them.

Grasping the rudder with one hand, I unslung my hemp coil with the other. I cast its fraying end to the man on the opposite side. He thrust the rope between rudder and hull. I heard a creak. The rudder flopped over as the Saracen helmsman hauled back. With a hideous scream the other man saw his whole forearm crushed to pink pulp against the hull.

In the distance I glimpsed the three Christian war galleys beating toward the scene with all speed. Ignoring Ponti, who fumbled ineptly with his own rope, I called instructions to the man with the crushed arm, a game fellow. He stayed afloat with the use of his legs and one hand, and helped me twist and coil and knot the rope around the rudder.

Bolts chopped the sea within an arm's length but the stern's slope permitted us to finish our task and sink back into the water, exhausted. The Saracen helmsman tried to work the rudder and discovered it would not answer. At once the hull began to fall away. In another moment we were exposed to the devils on deck, and faced with the swim back to the red galley. It seemed a league away now.

Ponti dived into the hail of bolts and started to safety. Aching end to end, I was about to do the same when I heard the other man's feeble cry:

"Master, help! I can't make it with this crushed arm!"

"Grapple around my neck and hang on," I shouted through the churning spray. "God knows if I can make it either, but let's try!"

He seized me like the old man who rode the back of the legendary Sinbad. I began to swim. He weighted me so heavily that each stroke sent new agony up my arms. I got

nowhere with a dozen strokes, becoming entangled with another drifting corpse.

Richard's galley was swinging for a broadside ram. The iron beak raced for the enemy's hull. Swift behind the red ship closed the three other galleys, decks thick with fighting men who could destroy the Saracen if only they could board her. Fortunately the enemy thus lost interest in three fools flopping their way through the sea. My only problem was to find strength to swim the distance with the sobbing burden I carried.

Ahead, Ponti slowed, snatching the dagger from his teeth. Unencumbered, it was no trick for him to dive beneath the waves, hoping to come up beneath my belly and slash me to death. I seized a length of floating hemp and thrust it deep into the water in front of me. I felt it tangle with an obstacle.

Kicking while the hurt man dug his fingers into my flesh to keep from falling off, I felt my naked heel jolt watery hide. Next thing I knew, Ponti surfaced, gasping for air, enraged.

He leaped through the spray, dirk arcing down for my head. I dodged. Ponti's poignard ripped over my shoulder and buried in the neck of my unfortunate companion. He burbled a scream and let go.

I closed fingers on Ponti's throat. His foul face loomed close, tongue protruding as he thrashed around. He brought his legs up to his chest and kicked out, bruising my privates so grievously that I released him and flailed off in the water. That was all the advantage he needed.

He dove for me, knife flashing again. Only the drifting hemp I'd used before saved me. I whipped it over my head in the manner of a lash. It curled around his arm. I jerked, jerked for my life's sake.

Ponti's hand opened. With a cry of alarm he saw his dagger drop into the sea and sink.

I was too exhausted to press him for a moment. In that interval he freed himself of the rope and raced for the red galley, swimming for his very life.

A great crashing and grinding assailed my ears. Through cresting waves and foaming spray I saw the iron ram-beak of Richard's galley bury deep in the Saracen hull.

On the enemy's opposite rail one of the Christian war galleys swung to. The red galley loosed itself in a noisy rending of wood. Water began to gush through the ruptured hull. The Saracen listed.

As her deck tilted up, black with men, I saw boarders from the Christian galley clambering across her rail, mailed knights swinging broadswords in fearsome circles. The first boarders had their heads lopped off by scimitars, but a moment later the second galley crushed the Saracen's bow and the minions of Saladin were suddenly outnumbered.

I watched the spectacle of carnage as I swam slowly back to the red galley, head dizzy with exertion, muscles afire. As I flopped over from side to belly and stroked harder for the ship, I saw Ponti clambering hand over hand up a rope. By the time I completed the same painful climb and collapsed panting upon the deck, shouts of praise ringing in my ears, he had vanished.

In the bow the king held the brazen trumpet to his lips, calling orders to his captains on the other galleys. The third had now joined the fray, ramming its own beak-prow into the Saracen's side for another mortal stroke. I tottered to the rail, fascinated and repelled by the sight of victory.

In one of the jagged openings made by the rams, frantic horses were trying to escape the drowning hold, tearing themselves to pieces on the ragged planks left gaping like sharp teeth. Saracens with mutilated bodies dropped over the side like fish into a barrel, screaming to Allah for succor as they died. The Christian knights swept the enemy deck clean.

All around the listing vessel the water bobbed with dead flesh, horse and human. Other rents in the hull disgorged bales of foodstuffs intended for the relief of Acre.

The Christian knights set the Saracen afire, having cast her captain overside minus his arms, legs and head. Just then the hull spewed out a vast quantity of Lebanese oranges, hundreds

upon hundreds of the little spheres bobbing in the water, ghastly bright among all the blood and floating limbs and thrashing animals.

The Christian galleys drew off. Hoarse cheers rose as the Saracen burned and slowly sank into the blue sea.

Weary and faint-headed, I looked up suddenly to see the king standing near. Enmity, contempt had been wiped away. He clasped my shoulder.

"Well done, minstrel."

Even the glower of Hugh of Burgundy, promising that Ponti would not fail again, could not dim my pride. I slipped exhausted to the deck, thinking only that I had temporarily healed the rift between Richard and myself. Whether I could heal it completely I did not know.

CHAPTER IV

IF THE DESTRUCTION of the Saracen ship was a good omen, what happened at Tyre not many days later was a bad one.

A nobleman called Conrad of Montferrat was overlord of that famous port. Richard went ashore to consult with him after we made an anchorage at dusk. In less time than it takes a drunkard to drain a horn of mead, he was back aboard the red galley, his regal face enraged.

He spat out furious oaths as he climbed to his favorite spot beneath the awning. Shortly thereafter, Hubert Walter's stout figure appeared against the southern stars at the bow, where Rolfe and I were relieving the boredom by casting dice.

"The King requests your presence, minstrel," announced Walter.

Rolfe was much started. "At such a time? When his brow is so black with anger?"

"Perhaps he wishes a song or two to blot out the affront he received in yon city." Walter's lips set sternly as he gazed over the water to the misty lights of Tyre. "For the King of England to be refused permission to set foot ashore is insult beyond bearing."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Montferrat didn't welcome him?"

"Montferrat isn't in Tyre. He has marched south to Acre. His flunkies showed the King a parchment signed in Conrad's own hand—no Englishman permitted inside Conrad's domain."

Rolfe scratched his mop of hair. "This is too deep. I thought Conrad was an ally."

"In name only. Come, pick up the cithara and step lively to the awning."

No further invitation was needed. I pulled my hesitant cousin across the empty deck. Water lapped against the hull. The lanterns of the fleet glowed in the damp dark.

Richard was seated alone beneath the awning, a brooding shadow.

"Welcome, minstrel. Sit by me and play softly a while."

His hand lifted to indicate the place I was to occupy. On his thumb glinted a fat and costly gold ring inset with a rich ruby. Rolfe's fingers brought from the cithara soft thrumming notes while Richard regarded me a long moment, his lion crest of reddish hair outlined against the distant stars. Hubert Walter busied himself with a curious sort of bow I had seen before.

At length the King spoke, his tone troubled, "Blondel, my friend. Have I commended you properly for your valiant role in sinking the Saracen?"

"Yes, my liege. I was amply rewarded by knowing the death of the vessel carried forward the King's cause."

"A cause now set back again by the malice of that rascal Conrad." He sipped from a cup of wine. "I summoned you

because I'm weary of petty monarchs who pervert the high purpose of this crusade and turn it into a scramble for personal gain. To escape worry for an hour—" His hand with the ruby ring closed upon my arm. "Let us sing together, as we did in happier days in Aquitaine. What new rhymes have you been concocting?"

Was he mocking me again? He sensed my hesitancy.

"Blondel, what's befallen that quick tongue of yours?"

"I don't wish to incur the King's displeasure."

His laughter was a welcome sound. "That, too, is why I summoned you. For my idle remarks, thoughtlessly spoken, I ask pardon."

"But you are the King! There is no need—"

"Be silent. There's great need. The problem of war weighs heavy on a man. Sometimes he forgets who is a friend and who is not. I acknowledge my folly."

I dared then to believe that I really had not lost the friendship of the King after all. Rolfe's grin showed his relief. Gratefully my cousin and I accepted the wine the King offered. As I was draining the cut Richard said, "Let me hear a song suitable for—Walter! God's ankles, will you cease playing with that thing?"

The remark was occasioned by the whack of a gray goose-feather quill Walter launched out over the sea from his strangely shaped bow.

"Pardon, my liege. I was only preparing this sweet thing for spiking a Saracen or two."

"That is a most curious weapon," muttered Rolfe.

Unable to conceal his pride, Walter showed him the curved weapon. "It is called a longbow."

Rolfe ran his hand along the hemp. "It's much like an arbalest."

"Oh, no, 'tis not half as clumsy as a crossbow. Properly pulled, it can pierce armor. Here, feel the strength of the wood. Solid yew. The hemp is rubbed with water glue for added strength. Lofty Burgundy calls it a toy. But one day such a bit of wood and string will change the course of many

a battle. With this a solider needs no armor. And he's twice as dangerous as a mounted knight."

"I've seen a few like it in this very fleet," I said.

"Among the Welsh mostly," nodded Walter. He notched another arrow and stretched the bow. Muscles stood out in his heavy neck. He loosed the quill at the stars.

"May I try it?" I asked him.

Walter laughed. "It's an English weapon. Men of France haven't the arm to pull it."

"Aquitaine isn't France. It's a dominion of the English lions."

"Very well, minstrel, here."

Walter passed one of his goosefeather shafts, which I notched. I drew the arrow back and left the bow's quivering power.

"Surrender, minstrel," laughed Walter. " 'Tis only half drawn yet."

"Be damned to this piece of junk." I pulled harder.

I heaved on the arrow with all my might. My arms strained and hurt. Walter kept up his good-humored jesting. Back came the arrow, back—

Cold sweat peppered my forehead. All at once Walter stopped talking. I forced the last fraction of tension from the bow, then let fly.

The quill whistled high among the stars and vanished. Making a jester's bow, I handed back Walter's pride.

"Even a minstrel develops strong arms climbing to a lady's chamber. Have I proved myself an honorary Englishman?"

Walter, Richard and Rolfe exchanged strained looks.

"More than honorary," Walter mumured. "I'd say you had the blood."

Richard transfixed me with that curious glance. "Another cup for your victory, Blondel. Then we'll play and sing."

"As your my liege wished." I downed the wine hastily. "Just give me one of those wood creatures, Sir Walter, and I'll skewer Prince Conrad himself."

Richard gestured. "Don't speak that way. We must hold back wrath."

"Why? He's flung the glove boldly."

"Ah, Blondel, how little you understand of delicate alliances of war."

The unintentional rebuke stung. "I admit political intrigues confuse and confound me. But any man has the right to know who is the enemy and who is not. I thought Conrad was loyal to our cause."

"What do you know of the Kingship of Jerusalem?" Richard asked with some weariness.

"Little beyond the fact that the former holder is dead and the title isn't much more than honorary, without power."

Richard leaned forward. "All true, Blondel. But when we recapture the Holy City, as I've sworn to do, the title will represent great power. Jerusalem will be the Christian capital of the East. So the Kingship becomes a cause of wrangling and feuding between Conrad and our companion Guy de Lusignan."

The King referred to the nobleman who had unsuccessfully besieged Acre since late summer of the year 1189. Richard explained that Guy had married the eldest daughter of the former King of Jerusalem. Thus he was the present holder of the empty title. Conrad in turn was the spouse of the second child of the dead king.

"So Conrad claims the title for himself, doubtless appreciating its future value to his thin treasury. The dispute still remains unsettled. Philip of France, however, is thick with Conrad. Some blood tie or other, dating far back. As you can imagine, that tie worsens my relations with the French King still further."

"So Conrad's action tonight is a way of drawing a line of battle?" I asked.

Richard nodded glumly. "When we should be united in the common cause of Christ, we are threatened with open strife. I have also heard it said that Duke Leopold of Austria, who is also at Acre, sides with Philip and Conrad. That along with seizing the Jerusalem kingship, they're even talked of turning an eye toward my lands in France and England itself."

"They mean to conquer England while they pretend to fight beside you?" I cried, aghast.

"It might require less conquering than you imagine."

This stirred Walter to grumble. "Though I've been censured for saying so before, I'll repeat it now, my liege. It was most unwise to leave Prince John to rule in your stead. Should Leopold or Conrad or Philip whisper the right words to John, the seizure could be almost bloodless."

"Enough!" Richard said. "I did not call Blondel here to listen to talk of civil strife and daggers in the back, but to refresh me with song, he and his cousin, as they did when we were young men in Aquitaine. Let's see if I still have wits to make a rhyme."

Rolfe picked out a familiar tenson. I stared into the starry dark and began shaping the first words that entered my head, words whose gloomy cast fitted the mood that had descended on me suddenly:

Two winters I am bound.
In love's fair fetters found.
Her eyes a donjon make for me
While she trips gayly round.

At the completion of the stanza, Richard caught up the melody and improvised in a rich, ringing baritone voice whose sturdy timbre I had not heard for too long.

Two summers I am chained.
In love's soft bonds constrained.
Her arms a bailey build for me
While she flies free, unpained.

Rolfe's tune was lonely. Richard and I lifted our voices alternately, but I felt further apart from him than ever.

Two winters I am bound.
Two summers I am chained.
In love's fair fetters found.
In love's soft bonds constrained.

Her eyes a donjon make for me.
Her arms a bailey build for me.
While she trips gayly round.
While she flies free, unpained.

The music ceased. Richard drew his mantle adorned with silver half moons closer about his shoulders. "A sad song, Blondel. It has little of the mirth of the ones we used to compose."

"In war," I said, "perhaps a man loses a taste for merry things."

"Yet with Leopold and Philip and Conrad intriguing night and day, there may be many a discreet mission for a man the King can trust. And you might find minstrelsy the perfect shield behind which worthy deeds can be carried out."

"I hope it will be so. Now, if the King wishes, I can attempt a song in a lighter vein."

Richard rose. "No more tonight. I'm weary." He cast a final glance at the glimmering lights of Tyre and seemed to slump a little. "Good night, friend."

And with Hubert Walter in attendance, the King departed.

Rolfe sidled near, the cithara silent and cold.

"Why so glum, cousin?"

"The past can never be brought back, Rolfe."

Rolfe nodded. "Yes, the King is no longer a light youth."

"While I'm still a fool." I aimed a kick at an overturned wine cup.

The great fleet plowed on to the south. Each day brought us nearer the battlefield of Acre. A mounting excitement could be sensed through the entire fleet. The crusaders sang hymns all night long, and cried to God for assistance in the coming fray. A favorable wind stayed at our stern. I watched the sere coasts drop behind and began to catch some of the excitement myself.

The King was engaged almost constantly in conferences with Hubert Walter and various knights. The brief hour we'd spent together seemed unreal. Then one afternoon a

squire in rich hose summoned me to the quarters of the Queen.

Berengaria greeted me cordially enough as I bent the knee. The only other person in her cabin was Lady Joanna.

She waited at a discreet distance while the Queen completed her business with me. The sight of Joanna's yellow hair, her fair form, those magic eyes the hue of woodsmoke in the fall, turned me clumsy. Berengaria's dark and lovely face was gently mirthful.

"Good minstrel, don't shake so in our presence."

"Beauty in single measure makes a man a giant, but in double measure, a simpleton."

Joanna laughed. "Nicely spoken," said the Queen.

"What service may I render the Queen?"

"Blondel, the rebuff the King met at Tyre only confirms what we have known for some time. Richard is a man with strong and dangerous enemies."

"Take consolation in the fact that no weak man ever causes hatred, my lady."

"Yes, we understand that. But a Saracen foe is one thing, a foe in the King's own camp another. We asked you here to beg a favor. Watch over the King when you are near him. A woman, also, has no place among the war tents and siege engines. Bring us word of any plotting against him. In short, exercise that concern we know you have felt for him since you were young men together. He esteems you highly though you're but his minstrel."

I darted a look at Joanna. Those lovely autumnal eyes met mine briefly. I thought I noticed a flicker of emotion, as if the young English girl suddenly saw me as something other than a clever clod.

"I will do my best, my lady."

"Your best should suit the Queen well, Blondel," said Joanna. "The sinking of the Saracen demonstrated your loyalty to the King."

While I was struggling for a suitable reply—Joanna had a mysterious power to stiffen my tongue—the chamber door opened. Hugh of Burgundy stalked in.

"A concert, Your Highness?" he inquired of Berengaria after rising. "This fellow turns up as often as lice on the head of a Saxon squire."

"The concert is finished, sire," I said. "Sour notes have intruded."

There was no concealing that Hugh wanted to drag out his broadsword and gut me. Two things stopped him: the tolerant smile of the Queen and the sudden red flush in Joanna's cheeks at sight of him.

Once more that insufferable sidewise smile twisted his lips. He claimed her a chattel by the mere act of looking at her. I retired with all possible speed.

Bitter gall poisoned my mind. I shuddered at the thought of Joanna being so blindly in love with the French knight. The thought drove me to my quarters, put the cithara in my shaking hands.

Rolfe rushed in.

"God help you, cousin, have you lost your senses? Will you smash the instrument I made for you?"

I thrust the cithara back in its place. Rolfe glanced at it sadly.

"Do you hate it so much?"

"Rolfe, forgive me. I lost my head."

"Over the English lady, no doubt. Blondel, no good will come—"

"Be quiet, you handsome lout. Let's go see whether we can tap the wine stores while the guards aren't looking. I've a sudden desire to drink until I stagger."

When we woke at last from drunken slumber and climbed out of the hold into which we'd stolen, our heads ached mightily. No guards could be seen. Some sort of commotion had aroused the whole galley.

We reeled up into the dusk. My skull pounded all the worse when a seaman knocked me on the shoulder.

"The Holy Headland, messires! 'Tis in plain view from the rail."

Brazen trumpets blasted from ship to ship. Rolfe and I lurched forward to see. There it was indeed, sacred Mount

Carmel, a hazy blur to the southward. Beyond it lay the broken hills of Galilee. Rolfe drew my attention to the near shore. A company of Genoese knights rode by on great chargers, dipping their lance pennons in salute.

We had already sailed past the northern perimeter of the Christian line drawn around Acre. In another moment red and yellow minarets sparkled in the sunset behind a spit of land whose slopes bore the ravages of burned and blackened olive groves.

"Acre! Praise God, Acre!"

A thousand throats howled it. My drunken torpor vanished. The time for action had come.

Even to a low fool.

CHAPTER V

TENTS AND flags and armor blazed and shimmered away to each horizon. Awe-struck thousands thronged the rails of the ships of the fleet. Richard stood near the helm of our galley, attired in his richest baldric. It was blue velvet, decorated with the royal devices of the lions and the letter *R* in gold thread. The whole barbarous panorama of war spread out before us.

Acre was a large, sprawling city. It gleamed with mosques and the green of lush gardens. A great clay wall surrounded it. The wall protected the Saracen forces inside, and was roughly the shape of a triangle.

One side fronted upon the harbor which was rapidly fill-

ing with anchoring Christian dromonds. The other two walls ran from points north and south of the harbor mouth to an apex inland, where stood the infamous Accursed Tower. From this tower, the Saracens rained Greek fire on the hapless Crusaders.

Back of Acre, on a plain rising to distant hills, spread the camp of the besieging Christians, a mighty tent city housing some four hundred thousand souls. Already great companies of knights of every nationality were pouring along the quay road outside the walls, roaring a welcome to Lion Heart. After two years of futile warfare under the direction of Guy de Lusingnan, they shouted to show the campaign had taken a more favorable turn.

In point of fact, few blamed Guy de Lusignan for his lack of success. Although the Christians ringed Acre effectively, they had been forced to attack while defending at the same time. For as soon as the Christians encamped in 1189, the Eastern devil Saladin threw a mighty cordon of his forces around them. The situation was in effect a siege within a siege. The Christians had survived for two years only by virtue of controlling the sea.

Above the Christian tents blew the banners of each country and each knightly company. Above the flags rose the Bad Neighbors, wooden towers used for scaling walls. And still further back, an almost infinite number of mounted horsemen appeared, black specks on the ridges overlooking Acre. The enemy.

When I asked the location of Saladin's headquarters, a Venetian sailor pointed to the hill of Ayyadieh, highest of all, and I was certain I could make out the Mussulman's black banner whipping over a tent of enormous size.

Acre itself seemed to have suffered little, even after the arrival of the army of Philip of France in April. If Philip had breached the walls anywhere no one could tell it. The only true sign that a stalemate war had been fought in this hot clime were the blackened, burnt vineyards and orchards on the surrounding hills and plains. To the north, one torched vineyard smoldered still.

Resplendent in his great baldric, Richard was rowed to shore. All over the Christian camp, torches had been lit in the hot dusk, a dancing, winking sea of them. Rolfe and I connived to be in one of the first boatloads to the beach. We were buffeted along by chanting, roaring thousands who followed Lion Heart up the plain to greet his fellow captains.

Trumpets rang and rang again. Richard rode Fauvel. Caught up in the excitement, I shouted his name as loudly as anyone else. Firelight gleamed on mail, on the red crosses of the French, the green of the Flemings, the heraldic devices of the Pisans and Genoese. Even the Germans were there, remaining to fight after their emperor, Barbarossa, was drowned while sailing to join them.

There also seemed to be a great quantity of women in the camp. They screeched and displayed their bodies for the English knights. Many of them looked more Saracen than Christian. All in all, I had never heard such a din as rose that night from five hundred thousand throats.

On a low knoll a huge pavilion had been erected to welcome Richard. Between this and the Accursed Tower at the intersection of the city walls lay wrecked bores and rams, mute testimony that Philip had not pressed the campaign vigorously. Fighting my way along, gouging and shoving to keep up with the King, I saw his features twist in the torchlight as he surveyed the poorly organized seige field. Then he cantered up the knoll and dismounted, and made greeting to the three great ones who waited for him outside the pavilion.

Philip of France was short, squattish, with suet cheeks and an unsteady eye. He seemed ill at ease in his armor. Conrad of Montferrat was a lean, elegant whippet of a man with a long chin. He moved in a foppish way and held himself disdainfully aloof from the clamor all around. Of the trio, only Leopold of Austria came close to matching Richard's stature, a huge blunt rock of a man with a broken nose.

I urged Rolfe along so we'd have a closer view. Richard's name was being chanted on and on through that sea of faces and firebrands. Philip of France was displeased by it.

As the great leaders exchanged greetings, more trumpets rang out.

Silence rippled across the camp. Distantly came a herald's cry, "Help, help for the Holy Sepulcer!"

To a man, five hundred thousand raised arms to the sky and roared:

Help, help for the Holy Sepulcher!

The echo of it must have roused the sleeping stars, and shaken Saladin in his stronghold on Ayyadieh.

"Hurry up, cousin." I pulled Rolfe. "I mean to go inside the great tent."

"Are you drunk still? Enter uninvited?"

"Why not? Unless I'm mistaken, Burgundy's whole retinue is going in now. Yes, there's that wretch Ponti. Minstrels too. Make way there! Make way for Richard's mountebank!"

The King and his fellows had already vanished into the pavilion but the entrances were still jammed by servants from the various fractions, all struggling to be admitted. I insinuated myself into the presence of Philip's doorkeeper and demanded entrance to the gallery of minstrels. By that time Rolfe had gotten lost somewhere outside. I sank down on a stool behind thin samite hangings, ignoring the unfriendly stares of the French joglars, already busy tuning up their instruments.

"Our most sincere congratulations upon your marriage," Philip was saying to Richard, without much conviction. He was seated on an ornate chair decorated with the lilies of France. He cocked an ear to the tumult outside. Richard's name was still being bawled to the sky. Philip and the effete Conrad, who was toying with a silver dagger, exchanged veiled sneers. I saw Hugh of Burgundy at a respectful distance from his King.

"One would think," commented Conrad, indicating the noise, "our Master Himself had returned to earth."

"This is no hour for blasphemous wit," said Richard, throwing a heavy glance at Conrad, who sniffed a pomade ball and ignored him. "What of the siege? If there are none

in this company willing to carry it forward, we will do so alone."

"To make yourself the hero of our followers?" said the stolid Leopold. He had some difficulty with the courtly French the monarchs employed, and spoke very ponderously. "The campaign has been proceeding well enough."

Richard bristled. "With not one breach in the wall?"

"We have only been here at Acre since April," whined Philip.

Richard leaped to his feet. "Yes, since April! Why do we see no sign of mangonels or ballista? No engines hurling blots and boulders at the Mussulman, but only the twisted wrecks of some rams? This army must do more than knock politely at the Saracen gate!"

"Sire," cut in Conrad, "His Majesty the French King has been most diligent in attacking the Accursed Tower."

"Pfaugh! Simple-minded tactics, to strike at the city's stongest fortification."

There were pained, even angry, exclamations. A slender knight of gentle mien but militant eye stepped forward. His brown locks were crowned with a curious pearl chaplet.

"It's true, Your Majesty, that we have suffered heavily at the Tower."

From a position behind Richard, Hubert Walter said, "Has the tunnel corps gone to work?"

"Our only engineers belong to King Philip," replied Leopold of Austria.

"We have been reluctant to risk them under the kettles of Greek fire."

"But having the engineers undermine the walls is the only positive way of breaching the city!" said the young knight wearing the chaplet.

"Guy de Lusignan speaks the truth," said Lion Heart. "Without the efforts of engineers, a siege is futile. King Philip, we demand that you order your engineers to renew their efforts."

"Brave words for a commander who only has to follow, not lead." grumbled Leopold.

Richard's gaze was stern. "We ask no man to do what we would not do. If Philip's engineers fear for their lives under the Greek fire, we will captain them."

"Our engineers are quite competent without King Richard's leadership!" snapped Philip.

"I would remind the English king of one more thing," put in Leopold. His great casque glinted in the torchlight, framing his brutal face with iron. "By agreement, each sovereign controls and commands his own knights and men-at-arms, but no others."

"Well said!" That was Conrad, reclining luxuriously with a goblet of wine. "Glorification of God the Most High, not personal enrichment, is what we seek."

It was plain that Richard wanted to dash the wine and the words straight back into the foppish Conrad's face. But he refrained. He was outnumbered. Added to his voice were only those of the pale, spiritual Guy and Hubert Walter, the latter clearly out of his depth among such exalted persons. Ranged against Richard was the combined might of the overlord of Tyre, the monarch of France, and the most powerful Duke of the Austrian lands. Guy de Lusignan, however, turned out to be more fiery than pale.

"Of the forces gathered here, King Richard, the French is the largest save for your new company. French spirit has not responded to being payed only three aurei for bravery."

A cloud darkened Richard's brow. "That a holy knight should need to be rewarded rankles us. Nevertheless, if that is the price of success in the Holy Land—" He gave a pointed look at puny Philip. "We took much treasure when we sacked Cyprus. We shall pay four aurei from our own funds."

"Our treasury is not that rich!" Philip cried. "Such extravagance would wreck—"

"Christ lost His life for us!" shouted Richard. "Can we not part with our material goods for Him?"

On the point of flying into a rage, the French monarch held back. Hubert Walter slyly slipped a gold piece to a hovering squire. The man fled into the night camp, crying

the news that Lion Heart was offering the sum of four aurei for every act of bravery. Within minutes a new tumult arose on the plain. Philip blanched when he heard it. Richard was lost in a sea of hateful glances. But he didn't hesitate to plunge into yet another ticklish topic.

"As for you, Montferrat, we deem your refusal to admit us to Tyre an act requiring apology."

Conrad fingered his pomade ball. "When His Highness acknowledges my sovereignty as overlord of Jerusalem, I shall welcome him royally."

Guy de Lusignan turned pale. Richard pointed to him.

"There stands the rightful ruler of the Holy City."

"There are those here who don't agree," said Leopold.

"By what power except that of greed does Conrad claim the throne?" demanded Richard.

The blunt remark produced a leaden silence. The assembled squires and pages whispered in their shadowed galleries. Conrad stalked toward Richard, his white fingers playing nervously with the silver dagger.

"Even the mightiest, Your Highness, should practice temperance when outnumbered and far from the seat of rule."

Richard reached for the golden hilt of his great sword. "If that is a threat, put it more plainly, and we will answer."

"Threats?" Conrad chuckled. "Your Highness misunderstands. I was merely suggesting that it would be imprudent for a monarch whose lands are in fact ruled by a younger brother to—"

Steel sliding on steel interrupted him. I sprang up, then held steady as stone to keep Hugh of Burgundy from ramming his sword through me.

"Here's one wretch we needn't have eavesdropping on our private conversations."

Hugh's pacing had carried him to a position from which he could see behind the hangings screening the minstrels. His broadsword whistled. I ducked. The blade cut the hangings in half. The French troubadours tittered.

Livid, Hugh approached Richard. "This scoundrel's presence offends me. Have him removed."

"No. Blondel may remain, so long as we have French nightingales in attendance too."

"My lords!" Quickly I bent knee. "I have no wish to disturb your gathering. Therefore I retire willingly."

In the posture of humility, I backed toward the pavilion entrance, really wanting to attack the obnoxious Hugh, but prevented by a wish to spare the king further embarrassment at my expense. Hugh sheathed his weapon with a clank. I hoped Richard would not call me back, and he didn't. The humiliating laughter of Burgundy and his French troubadours rang out as I retreated into the night.

I wandered through the hoof-churned makeshift streets dividing the knightly pavilions until I found the silken tents which had been hastily put up to house Lion Heart and his party. There, snoring on a straw pallet, was Rolfe.

His slumber suited my purposes. I wanted to walk a while through the camp. I stepped into the warm night, cheeks stung by dust flung up on the hot *khamsin* blowing from the south.

The host was devoted to the redemption of the Holy Sepulcher. But the knights and their men-at-arms behaved in ways that better suited defilers of that sanctuary. As I walked I saw a band of Flemish knights flogging a servant with ropes, solely, I judged, for their own amusement. Out of other chivalric pavilions came fierce oaths as knights drank and cast dice. A mailed Teuton reeled by on foot, vomiting prodigiously. A Muslim whore of barely thirteen years, clad in rags, rubbed against me in the shadow.

I fended her with some remark or other and hurried on disheartened. The Christian camp hardly seemed the kind of place where a man of low ways could redeem himself. It seemed a setting in which a rogue would feel perfectly at home.

Soon I was mingling with a crowd of friendly Pisans, tapping their wine keg. Drink abolished gloom. An hour later, when I passed a dark lane down which I spied a squire throttling another of a rival faction, in order to lift

his purse, I was sotted enough to call out cheerily that I wished him pretty pickings.

I wandered into a vast acreage inhabited by Greek and Phoenician women. They were busy with iron tubs and stones on which they slapped and hammered wet quilted robes and linen tunics. Even at war, an army must have its clothes laundered. Some of the wenches seemed attractive and willing enough to make dalliance easy whenever the call of flesh became too strong.

I staggered on, humming, turning handsprings, gloriously drunk. Then I realized I'd wandered into an unfamiliar section. Long chains of Saracen picket torches shone on the nearby hills. I was turning my wavering step back toward the English encampment when a woman's scream tore the hot dark.

Blinking, I swung around. A frail creature in a torn linen shift was running barefooted down the rude street. At first she appeared to be another of those child whores. She drew nearer, her dark hair streaming out behind her. I saw firm, far from childish breasts thrusting through her garment. The ripped shift left little else to the imagination.

Without really seeing me, she managed to stumble against me. She beat me with her fists, still screaming.

"Be quiet, wench! Stop bawling and—God's wounds! Don't hit me there again!"

"Mercy, master, mercy on me! Hide me from them!"

I snatched her trembling wrists and shook her.

"Come to your senses! I can't do a thing if you fight like a mongrel cat."

I lifted her chin, glimpsing a bronzed, not unpretty face with pale green eyes of an Eastern cast. All at once she saw I didn't mean to harm her. She huddled against me, her budding breasts pushing at my tunic.

"Blessed Master, hide me quickly, else they'll come rape me again."

"*Rape* you? Who did it, little one?" My tongue was quickened by wine's bravery. "Tell me and I'll attend—"

Hooves thundered down the lane. The wine fumes cleared

out of my skull in a rush. I put my arms around the girl's shaking body as her attackers rode into sight.

There were many drunken shouts in the Germanic tongue as they sighted us and galloped harder, a dozen mailed knights whose crests and cloaks identified them as followers of Leopold of Austria. In another instant they would be upon us.

CHAPTER VI

WITH MUCH rattling of armor and stamping of hooves, the Austrian knights maneuvered their iron-plated beasts into a ring around us.

A burly knight whose head was hidden by an iron casque barked question after question in his own tongue. I shook my head and made a courtly bow. My hand dipped toward the hidden Florentine dagger as I bent. The knight's lance point hit me under the chin and tossed me on my back.

The girl fell too, green eyes wild with fright. The men laughed when they saw her slender flanks exposed.

Well, if I must die for this tattered wench, I would do it with a flourish. I leaped up and said in French, "Talk in a tongue of civility, if you have a question."

This angered him. With deliberate motions he seated his lance, unfastened his casque and handed it to a companion. Long yellow locks hung to his shoulders. Of middle age, he had a heavy jaw and cheeks scarred here and there by souvenirs of many a joust. His nose was thick, his eyes a

clear, innocent blue, his lips heavy. He inclined his head in contempt and replied in heavily accented French, "Fellow, your pardon. I wasn't informed a Baron of the realm had to watch his manners with a commoner."

Several of the other knights understood the language too. They laughed and clanked their shields.

"Baron or not, it's a question whether you have any manners worth watching, my lord."

"A magpie, are you?" he growled. "An English magpie. From your livery you're a follower of *Teufel Richard.*" He pronounced the name hatefully.

"That is my honor, Your Eminence."

"Stand aside. We have business with the woman."

The girl fell into a fresh fit of sobbing. She leaped back to the scant protection of my curved arm. I didn't care for the way the knight's gaze pried lewdly at her all too visible femininity. I said, "The question is, my lord, does she have business with you? I think not. From her expression, it's plain you've trafficked with her enough tonight."

He laughed. "Are you a knight in rags to so defend her?" One mailed fist dipped and returned holding a powerful *martel de fer,* a weapon much like a pickaxe. Its point could crush a casque and bite deep into brains. "Have you any weapon like this, gutter knight?"

"Only a tongue with barbs, my lord. But very food for deflating swollen balloons."

"What little value you place on your life!" He swung his evil weapon lightly to and fro. "Since you won't grace me with your name, I'll tell you mine instead. It is Friedrich, Baron Sturmwulf. I have some small fame in the lists. Does that change your mind at all?"

I shook my head. "I could tell at once you had much talent for jousting. With women, infants and dumb animals."

"God's damnation!" He threw the *martel de fer* back across his shoulder as though to drive it into my head. One of his companions stayed his arm.

"Try me no more, Englishman!" he growled. "Turn the girl loose and be on your way."

How far did I dare bait him? I spat on the ground.

"That for your request, Baron. She's my servant. I have been searching for her. I won't release her."

The *martel de fer* lifted again, its iron point burning and winking.

"Perhaps a taste of this—"

"Go ahead. I have fought off swine before."

Baron Sturmwulf unloosed the straps binding his shield to his left arm, carefully passed the plate of iron with its scarlet griffon emblem to another of the knights. He took a firmer grip upon the *martel de fer* and nodded his head most politely. To his men he whispered with a smile, "Let us kill him."

The dozen knights vied with one another to be first to trample me. Sturmwulf called them off, jerked his charger's head around, trotted a short distance back along the rutted lane, then wheeled and kicked his mount furiously. The *martel de fer* rose high over his head. His knights scattered to allow him the first blow. My dagger on my calf would be of no use against a horse heavy with armor plate, but one of the smoldering torches might.

I pushed the girl over, spilling her to earth while I tore a smoking brand from its cresset and swung. I thrust the flames at the Baron's galloping beast. A shrill neigh of animal terror rent the night. The beast pawed the sky to escape the heat.

Sturmwulf's knights jostled for a position from which they could attack. One unsheated his broadsword, slashing down at my head. I tightened my leg muscles and somersaulted backward like a tumbler, flinging the torch as my feet left the earth. I had the instant I needed to snatch down another torch and run into their midst.

Sturmwulf's cry rang oug, "Split his skull, God curse you, or I'll split yours!"

But the first torch had fired the cloak of one of his men. The knight was in a panic to tear off the flaming garment. I rammed my torch under the belly armor of the nearest

horse and heard him scream. The flung cloak struck another charger's neck. He reared and unseated his rider.

The confused knights clanked about, berating each other because none could get a clear stroke at me. All at once my heel slipped. Sturmwulf battered through, leaning from his high perch to drive the *martel de fer* between my eyes.

I had a wild glimpse of his long yellow locks flying, his eyes red in the firelight as he swung. I threw the torch straight at his mouth.

Sturmwulf shrieked and dropped his *martel.* It grazed my skull as I clambered up and hunted the girl in the stamping, twisting forest of horses' legs. I saw her, on the other side of a frightened horse. Sturmulf's agonized yells smote my ears as I fastened hands on the rider's cloak, pulled him bodily from horseback and took his place.

My knee ached when I kicked the charger's side plates. I hauled on his bejewelled bridle. The girl snatched at my arm. I pulled her up behind me as the horse reared and bolted off down the lane at a gallop.

Faster and faster the stallion bore us along the camp streets. The girl clung to my waist, her cheek next to my back. When we reached a crowded area, I abandoned the horse and we ran to the pavilion where I had left Rolfe. I was dripping with the cold sweat of fear I'd been too busy to notice during the fighting. My cousin appeared rubbing sleep from his eyes. I turned to the girl.

"I think you'll be safe from them now."

"Sweet name of Jesus!" goggled Rolfe. "A Saracen houri?"

"More like a frightened girl who has fainted," I said, for she had done just that.

I carried her inside, conscious again of the thrust of her young breasts beneath the shred of cloth serving as her only garment. By the light of a flickering lamp I laid her on Rolfe's pallet, then covered her with a blanket for modesty's sake. I washed her face with a cloth wetted in a basin Rolfe fetched. In the wan scarlet gleam that face was revealed as pretty in a sad, starved way.

"Who set on you?" Rolfe wondered. "Your clothes are a sight."

"A pack of Austrian nobles." I dampened the girl's brow and cheeks while I told him what had happened. "I saw no faces except the leader's, but it was ugly enough for twelve. He's a titled murderer by name of Friedrich, Baron Sturmwulf."

Rolfe crossed himself fervently.

"You know him?"

"When we became separated tonight, I managed to locate a cask of wine. From those gathered around it I heard his name. He is Duke Leopold's right arm, and very fierce."

"I agree. A woman or an unarmed man excites him to great deeds of valor."

"Don't sneer, Blondel. They say he has a terrible temper."

"God's name, so do I when I'm set upon by jackals."

"I fear you overstepped yourself. He'll revenge himself if he can."

"Well, I don't remember that I told him my name. In a camp of five hundred thousand, perhaps one man can escape notice quite a while."

"Let's hope you manage to escape notice until the war is completely over. Sturmwulf may—"

"Enough, cousin. Our scared bird is waking."

So she was, with a quick lifting of her eyelids that revealed strange, greenish pupils afire with terror. Her hands made fists. Her backbone became taut. The coverlet fell away from her breasts as she flew at me, thinking perhaps she was back among her captors.

I tried to calm her, to no avail. She yelled wildly in some dialect both musical and singsong. I covered her mouth and pushed her down.

"Hold, hold! I don't fathom the language but it's plain you want to rip my eyes out, and that's ingratitude."

Her dark locks gleamed as she calmed a little and turned to see her surroundings.

"Those evil men—are they gone?"

"Temporarily. My name is Blondel de Nesle. I'm minstrel

to King Richard of England. This is my cousin, who will see if he can find a loaf and a flagon of wine in our meager stores."

A friendly kick in the rump set Rolfe in motion, leaving me alone with the girl. The pert pink of her breasts shone through her shift.

"We are in the English camp. You may rest here a while, provided you continue to talk French. I want to know when you plan to attack again."

"I beg your pardon, master." The greenish eyes were tender, oddly appealing. "It isn't easy to behave well when you're set upon by lords who consider your body their property."

"Did they assault you?"

Her rather wide, soft mouth wrinkled in disgust.

"The leader took his pleasure. I escaped while the next was making ready. They came to my hut on the pretext that their fine gamebesons were filthy. Which they were. That beast Sturmwulf smelled like a pig."

"Are you a wash-woman?"

"Yes."

"And thus you learned French?"

She nodded. I asked her name. She replied, almost defiantly, "Zoe."

"Are you a Christian, Zoe?"

Bitterly she said she wasn't.

"When your belly's empty, master, you only have time to worry about filling it. Filling your head with notions of God is for the nobly born. I come from the port of Tyre. My parents were Muslim, though not Saracen. Much Eastern blood is in me, including that of ancient Phoenician sea kings. My mother is long dead. A year ago my father was slain in a street brawl by some drunken followers of Tyre's overlord, Conrad. Since then I've been at Acre, washing for the army. It's better than selling your body and becoming an out-and-out whore," she finished with some heat.

There was a fierce pride about her that touched me. Fleetingly I thought of Joanna Pembroke. Just as quickly I

forgot her. The tender sight of Zoe's breasts only a hand's width from me exerted a powerful influence.

"We face a predicament, Zoe. What to do with you. If we return you to the camp of the wash-women, Sturmwulf can easily find you. But I have no fat purse for hiring you to stay and serve me."

"Let me work for you without pay, master!" She clasped my hands between hers. "I'll tend you and your cousin gladly. Clean your garments in a very fine way. Prepare tasty meals. After all, you did take on the role of my protector tonight."

Rolfe's pained glance showed me he thought the alliance would be against our best interest. But I couldn't bring myself to turn this frail girl loose in the squalor of the camp. Besides, flesh is weak. Mine had been long starved.

"Very well, Zoe. We'll try it a while to see how it works out."

She clapped her hands in delight. "Please give me that loaf, Master Blondel. I'm famished."

While Rolfe and I watched with astonishment, she devoured the entire slab of coarse bread and most of the wine. Then, as though she'd already established her rule, she asked for water, and also that we leave her alone while she made herself presentable.

When we returned to the pavilion a little later, we found her a changed girl. Though she still wore the same poor shift, she had contrived to mend the worst rents. She had scrubbed her face free of grime and bound up her hair with a length of cord. Even Rolfe lost his uneasiness while she fussed over us, carrying a fresh wine jar to a taboret set between my cousin and me. With that jar and others we passed the remainder of the night.

Zoe told us many tales of her childhood in Tyre. None was precisely appetizing or pretty, but they all confirmed by belief that I'd acted rightly in offering her a haven. In turn, I sang a pastorela or two in exceedingly drunken tones. She watched me closely, hands locked about her knees, chin

resting there too. Her sleek young flanks gleamed in a most disturbing way.

Gradually the stars paled. The noise of the camp fell to a mutter. Our lamp went out in a hissing pool of oil. The cithara dropped from Rolfe's fingers and he snored.

I rolled over in my pallet and cradled my hand on my arm. Exactly how much time passed before warm lips near my cheek roused me, I can't say.

Zoe pressed her mouth near mine. Her green eyes shone with a strange intensity. "Master Blondel, the hour is quiet. I want to repay you for protecting me."

"Sturmwulf hurt you," I muttered vaguely, realizing what she had in mind.

"This is not cruelty, Master. It's a gift freely given."

"Zoe, there's no need—"

Her faintly spiced lips stopped mine.

Whatever longings and desires I felt for Joanna Pembroke didn't trouble me. She drew closer and I realized she had left her shift behind. My hands stole down her bare legs, delighting in their warmth.

Her lips were wise beyond her years. They were inviting and faintly damp with what I discovered to be tears as we kissed more and more strongly. Finally all doubt was swept away as I caressed her firm, tender breasts.

Zoe grew ardent. What started as a duty for her became a pleasure. She was no virgin, but she might have been for all the tenderness and gentility she brought to the act.

I swept my arms under her supple spine, driving away thoughts of pain and perdition as I claimed her body.

While Rolfe snored on, we drowsed in each other's arms, naked except for a coverlet drawn over us. Dawn shone wanly through the entrance hangings. Kissing each other, we never heard the morning clamor begin in the camp, nor the heralds announcing a new day of the holy war.

In succeeding days our makeshift household fell into a new pattern of order.

On the plain below the Acre garrison, meantime, Richard

pressed the siege. He had vowed publicly that he would breach the walls and bring down the Saracen banner by no later than the middle of July.

That a small Saracen army had so long withstood the assaults of the Christian host was testimony to the strength of Acre's walls. Richard immediately set about reducing that strength. Day and night, in the fetid summer heat, great mangonels and ballista and an occasional French *trebuchet* hurled iron bolts and mighty boulders at the Accursed Tower and the adjoining walls.

The Christian rear was constantly harried by bands of Saladin's horse archers. They would ride down to discharge a flurry of their short arrows, then gallop back to Ayyadieh before they could suffer a loss. Saladin had too few men to press a vigorous attack. But neither was he willing to retreat. His courage and skill were much admired by Richard.

A far greater threat than attack from behind was the scalding Greek fire constantly poured down from the city walls. So deadly was its burning caress that men operating the siege engines were forced to work underneath mantlets, wooden trestles covered with layers of hides. Long rows of these mantlets also extended from the Christian lines to just beneath the walls, where the French engineers pushed forward the tunnelling and timbering, despite heavy losses.

Rolfe and I joined the labor gangs dragging platforms loaded with mangonel bolts from the center of the camp to the front lines. It was on such a trip that I first heard Richard had fallen sick with the pestilent fever so prevalent in the Holy Land.

Richard's leadership, oddly enough, was strengthened during his illness. While Philip and Leopold took their ease in their pavilions, Richard, naked except for linen drawers, insisted upon being carried on a litter to a place by the siege engines. There, shivering with fever behind a mantlet, he consulted Arab maps in preparation for the final attack, or banged away at Saracens on the walls with a crossbow.

Shortly after the opening of the month of July, I was summoned one night to Richard's pavilion.

The King lay unconscious with the fever on a bed of hides. His fine features were thin and wasted. His cheeks ran with cold sweat. I was greeted by Hubert Walter, who drew me into the shadows and said in a whisper, "Blondel, once the King said he might have missions of confidence for a trusted friend. Such a mission presents itself now. Take this."

Into my hand he pressed Richard's ruby thumb ring.

"At the foot of the hill of Ayyadieh near the enemy lines, you'll discover a gnarled and burned cyprus tree. By that tree you'll meet two strangers. Don't ask to see their faces. Only show the ring. They'll recognize it as a sign of safe conduct. Bring them here to the King. It might be wise to take your cousin, since the territory is dangerous, but do so only if he can be trusted to keep silent. Return as quickly as you can."

I departed hastily and fetched Rolfe. Together we crept beyond the lighted perimeter of the camp into the burned wasted land belonging to neither side. In a grove of twisted trees we came upon the pair we had been sent to find.

The hooded men had brought two horses with them. One was a blooded Arabian whose priceless white hide gleamed in the dark. Exchanging singsong comments, the men passed the ring back and forth. They seemed satisfied. Thinking I heard other horses nearby, I sent Rolfe to look, but he returned without finding anyone.

After a little more conferring, the taller of the hooded figures elected to remain with the horses. The other accompanied me through the darkest streets to the pavilion of the King.

Richard had wakened and thrown a cloak around his shoulders. He rose to his feet as we entered. He bowed, shaking with a chill. The visitor threw back his hood.

"Welcome, powerful and famed Salah-ed-Din."

Bending the knee, I nearly fell over in astonishment. When I composed myself, I saw a fierce yet courtly dark face, heavily bearded. So this was the famous Kurdish Sultan! The

lord of the Mamelouks who had succeeded in uniting the entire Mulsim empire against the Christians! This was also the enemy. And he and Richard were exchanging greetings like lost brothers!

In broken French Saladin said, "We heard our noble foe was ill, and wished to offer this talisman to aid in restoring his health."

I heard no more. Hubert Walter hustled me into the dark.

"Bad business," commented Walter. He cast an eye over the torchlight camp. "If news of this encounter should leak out, Richard's position would be seriously harmed. Men of Philip's stamp cannot understand the fascination Saladin feels for the code of chivalry. I've heard our King is almost an idol to him. In less troubled times, there's no doubt they would have been fast friends, for each respects the other greatly."

"And the Sultan secretly communicated his wish to greet the King in person, in spite of the danger?"

Walter nodded nervously. "Wait here. You're to make sure he gets back safely."

Within an hour the hooded figure glided out of the pavilion. During the interval I had eavesdropped shamelessly, and discovered to my surprise that the Sultan was neither a fiend nor a raving savage, but educated, courtly and polite. He and the King exchanged mutual good wishes as well as views on warfare in general. Saladin's final hope was that the great Lion Warrior would recover speedily. Wondering at the ways of lofty men in war, I guided the robed ghost over the path we had taken before.

A grim shock awaited us in the burned grove. There was no sign of the other Saracen, nor of the horses.

Saladin threw back his cowl. His black eyes burned.

"Is it betrayal, then?"

Rolfe shrank back. I hastened to blurt, "My lord, they must be somewhere nearby."

"My nephew Takadin would not leave his appointed post."

The other visitor had been the Sultan's relative and chief

general! The stew grew worse and worse. We searched the grove in vain, Saladin's wrath increased.

"Return to your King," he said, "and tell him Saladin can repay treachery in kind."

"Your nephew must have fallen prey to a roving band of knights." I said quickly. "They often range out after nightfall in search of prisoners. Give me leave to hunt your nephew and undo the mistake. I'm sure the King would take no part in such a plot."

Saladin deliberated. "I will wait here an hour. If Takadin is not returned, I shall climb Ayyadieh and order my host to attack this camp, even if we die to a man avenging him."

An hour? To find one man among five hundred thousand?

Yet the King's honor was at stake, and scores of lives as well. I signalled Rolfe, knowing now I had heard lurkers in the vicinity earlier after all.

"We will have him in half the time, Lord," I promised, hardly believing it. "Hurry, cousin."

I was cold with sweat from neck to boot as I dragged Rolfe off through the grove at a run.

CHAPTER VII

I WAS fearfully conscious of the rush of time as we reached our own pavilion. Rapidly I told Zoe of the problem confonting us. I had already discarded the notion of enlisting Hubert Walter's aid. He could rally scores of knights in the search, but this would only spread the news that the King

had welcomed Saladin into the heart of the Christian camp.

"We must search ourselves. You, Rolfe, in the northern pavilions. I'll take the south. Zoe, you go the lines westward. Waste no time listening outside tents, but run and keep your eyes open for a white Arabian stallion with Eastern trappings. He certainly won't be out of sight as Takadin is sure to be. Meet back here before an hour is half gone. Then, if we've had no luck, I'll go to Walter."

They rushed off in the appointed directions. I went my way too, running as I'd never run before. I had no success.

At the designated time I returned. I needed no words to tell me Rolfe had also failed. He sat dispiritedly on an empty wine cask outside our tent. A moment later Zoe's slim form flew out of the dark.

"I saw the white beast, master Blondel! Arrayed exactly as you said."

"Where?"

Great pain showed on her face. "In the pavilions of the Austrians."

My belly knotted. "Fate couldn't play such a filthy trick."

"But it had, master." Tears welled in her green eyes. "I heard the voices of Sturmwulf and the Duke Leopold himself. I asked a guard what they were doing inside. He told me they had—had tied a knotted rope around the skull of some Saracen soldier and were tightening it until his brains cracked. I heard laughter. And screaming."

"Rolfe, go to Hubert Walter. Tell him what's happened. I know, cousin, I know. I said we mustn't. But I can't steal Takadin from an army. There's no other way. All I can do is hope to spare Saladin's nephew until you arrive with help. Fly swiftly. Zoe, wait here."

"I won't, master! When Sturmwulf sets eyes on you again—"

"I'll manage him now as I did once before," I said, with a confidence I hardly felt. I left her beside the cask, crying because she was sure I was a dead man.

How much of the hour had elapsed? I sped to the pavilion

of Duke Leopold. A guard tried to bar my way. I upset him in the dust and flung aside purple hangings.

Broadswords flashed from scabbards. I swept off my cap. Wearing a fool's grin, I danced across the carpet on which the unfortunate young Mussulman knelt. He was stripped to his pantaloons. The vicious rope bound his forehead. He moaned now. Blood trickled down his neck and cheeks. It took all the nerve I had to present myself with a bow to Duke Leopold.

He sat beside his Sturmwulf. The latter had cast off all but his long linen undertunic. He lolled in a drunken state which was quickly overcome once his merciless blue eyes focused on me. Brown Takadin fell over on the exquisite carpet, clenching his teeth. The ring of knightly torturers moved away from him, holding blades ready to use on me instead.

"What rashness brings you into our presence unbidden, minstrel?" Duke Leopold snarled.

Sturmwulf leaned over. "Is this lump of dung familiar to you, sire?"

"An errand of mercy, worthy lords." I cut in. "Be so good as to leash your dogs with the iron fangs until I tell you the name of this man you're torturing."

Leopold said to Sturmwulf, "He is Blondel. The English King's fool."

Sturmwulf chuckled. "I've searched all the wrong places. Well, I need search no more. Good Duke, he robbed me of one prize a while ago. Now he's trying to do it again."

Sturmwulf tottered up. He extended his right hand. A squire slapped a broadsword into his palm.

"With your permission, Duke, I'll rid our presence of him, as an irritating insect is crushed under heel."

"Then you'll have the whole Saracen host to reckon with, Baron," I declared.

Leopold lifted a lace kerchief. "A moment Friedrich. Let's amuse ourselves and listen to his prating before you kill him."

"The Baron has no wits for fool's talk," I said. "Or am I in error? Perhaps he simply has no wits."

Sturmwulf screamed. Or more correctly, he bayed like a gored bear. He trembled so violently I thought he might faint. His fingers tightened to bloodless white on the sword haft. My little barb had thrown him into such a rage that the blade dropped from his fingers. He sat down and drank wine with two shuddering hands clasped on the cup.

"My lord has a poor temper for a gentle Christian knight," I said, wondering how long it would take Hubert Walter to reach here. Takadin had recovered a little. He stared at me with a mixed glance of fear and hope. "Sir Baron, this tongue-tied fury ill becomes you. But it becomes your liege even less to torture the Sultan's nephew."

"Our prisoner is a Mussulman soldier captured by the Baron and his knights!" Leopold shouted.

"I beg my lord's pardon. True, he is a soldier. But he is also Takadin, blood kin of Salah-ed-Din, who demands his return. Else many Christians will die in a suicidal attack that won't be warfare but carnage."

The burly Austrian Duke couldn't decide what the truth was. He hesitated. He glanced at the prisoner. Then at Sturmwulf, who sat awaiting his chance to slaughter me.

"I tell you it is Takadin! Didn't he wear fine rainment beneath his cloak?"

"He did," Freidrich agreed. "But—hell's wrath! This is some trick of the English devil, the further to seize control of our armies. Sir Otto, Sir Roln! Tighten the cords again. Inquire once more about the Mussulman's identity."

"I warn you, noble lords—!" I began. They paid no heed. The two knights rushed to the prisoner, inserted a wooden rod in the loop of rope and twisted it ferociously.

Deeper into Takadin's skull the knots bit. Deeper—

The wretched man's eyes threatened to pop from his head. He shuddered and screamed uncontrollably. Sturmwulf whispered in the Duke's ear, causing him to laugh as he drank wine.

"Stifle your impatience, Baron. One death at a time."

A page rushed panting into the pavilion and threw himself down.

"The English general, sire!"

I heard a jingle of caparisoned horses outside, and the voices of many knights. A moment later, sword drawn, Hubert Walter faced the Duke.

"Release the Mussulman, Your Grace. King Richard has promised no harm shall come to him."

"He's ours!" Sturmwulf shrieked. "A filthy Mussulman who—"

"He is the Sultan's *nephew!*"

Cowed by the force of Walter's shout. Duke Leopold flushed but gave in.

"Very well. Cut him free. You realize, my stubborn Englishman, what a pretty tale it's going to make—your monarch consorting openly with the enemy."

Walter didn't reply, though he clearly wanted to—by ramming his broadsword into the Austian's belly. He helped loose the Mussulman, assisted him with his cloak and told him to go outside at once. Some of Walter's knights would export Takadin to the lines.

"One moment," Takadin said.

He approached me in a stumbling step, face shadowed beneath his cowl and traced with lines of black blood.

"I will remember you, minstrel. If I never have opportunity to repay your kindness, I shall pray daily to our Prophet's city, for a full moon of days, that Allah will reward you instead."

"A noble warrior deserves a noble death, not a mean one," I said. "Go in peace."

He nodded and hurried out.

Sturmwulf spoke. "Minstrel, you may walk free too. But count the hours left to you. One insult demands death. Two demand the agonies of hell. I promise you'll experience them."

I laughted. "The sight of your face is a sufficient foretaste, Baron."

He began to tremble again, unable to think of any retort except a whack of his sword. Walter's presence stayed him.

I breathed more easily in the muggy night air. Struggling to horse, Walter did not.

"I can't tell whether you did the King a service or a disservice tonight, Blondel. I suspect the latter. Not only have you started a public scandal, you've also stirred the wrath of dangerous men. Sturmwulf may be a brute, but don't underestimate him. No man is stronger physically, nor more respected in knightly combat. And he hates you."

"I assure you the feeling is returned." I shrugged. "Besides, what choice did I have?"

"Or Richard, for that matter. But it's bad business all the same."

With that he rallied his knights and set off down the torchlit avenue to the King's pavilion. I scrambled for a ride on the rump of the last charger in the train.

What Hubert Walter grimly prophecied came to pass.

A scalawag squire who had lingered in the vicinity of Lion Heart's pavilion the night of the fateful visit spread the tale that Salah-ed-Din had come to see the ailing monarch in person. Richard chose to allow tongues to clap as they wished, neither affirming nor denying the tale. He was more concerned with fighting off his illness and with driving his captains night and day to crack the walls of Acre before half July was gone.

For my part, I managed to drive the threat of Baron Sturmwulf out of my mind by losing myself in hard labor on the siege engines. We sweated and groaned and twisted the gut cords of a mighty ballista. When released, the cords unwound and hurled an iron bolt against the walls. It was midday, and in such a setting, that I saw Joanna again.

My face was grimy, my body rank with sweat. She was mounted upon a fine palfrey, in company with several other ladies of her station, the whole group accompanied by Hugh of Burgundy. He was all agleam with lace and rings, not showing a speck of dirt anywhere.

The women of nobility who had come to the Holy Land were only allowed off the galleys and dromonds which quartered them for short periods of time, until Acre fell. Such had been Richard's edict. Joanna had thus been put

out of mind, with Zoe's caresses helping. Now I was stung anew by the sense of my low station, and by my longing.

Late that night Zoe crept to my pallet in her usual fashion. We lay kissing awhile. Then she drew away and turned over, her white back toward me.

I touched her shoulder. "Have I angered you, Zoe?"

"There's no anger in me, master Blondel. Only sorrow I prefer you don't see."

"Come here."

She obeyed dutifully but with little heart.

"What's wrong?"

"With me, master? Nothing."

Her breasts gleamed ivory white in the gloom. Her green eyes, haunted by memories of Phoenician sea kings, were empty and sad.

"But in you there's a coldness I can't thaw. I've seen such looks in a man before. When he loves one woman with his arms and another with his heart."

"Foolishness, Zoe."

"The very feebleness of the declaration gives you away, master. Do you love me?"

Faced with it, and the heartbreaking sweetness of her face, I couldn't lie.

"Zoe, I find you one of the dearest women I have ever—"

"Dear?" she broke in wistfully. "That's not the same as true passion."

She pressed her cheek against mine, her ebony hair faintly accented with spice.

"I don't mind. I'm content here. Whenever you want me, I'll do your bidding. It only breaks my heart to think that—no, I'll be silent."

Fervently she gave me her mouth.

Her lovely face was warm and salted by tears she tried to conceal while we caressed. I loved her as we had loved often before, yet I would have been a knave to pretend to myself—and a worse one to pretend to her—that our relationship went beyond a simple physical hunger. It was the craving all people in all times feel when great events

move around them and war and possible death darken the skies.

Zoe delivered herself ardently to my mouth and hands and body. She cried throughout the whole encounter.

As she dropped off to sleep afterward, shuddering faintly from her tears, I decided I must never touch her again. It would be worse to break her heart with false hope than with none at all.

A yellow-haired highborn woman on a palfrey, who saw me as only one sweated body among thousands, had reminded me painfully where my heart truly lay.

Through the night I tossed and turned. It was an intolerable situation. I could find no solution.

On the third night after my encounter with Joanna, Richard summoned Walter and his leading knights to his pavilion. Representatives of the other monarchs were also in attendance. I listened from the minstrel gallery as Richard, restored to health, described a parchment he had received at sunset from Philip of France.

"The King informs us the tunnels are mined and all the timber props in place. Therefore, we'll press our attack at dawn, and seize Acre before another day passes."

As soon as the meeting ended the various noblemen retired. Richard called me to his side for a cup of mead. We sat drinking and chattering on various topics relating to the coming battle. A herald could be heard halooing far off in he dark:

"To arms, Christian knights! Acre falls on the morrow!"

Scarlet, Richard leaped up.

"Do my ears trick me? Isn't that the Austrian camp?"

"Aye, my liege. The herald is shouting loud enough to wake the Apostles in their graves."

"Not to mention Saladin on Ayyadieh. Brainless whoresons! I cautioned them to silence." He rushed outside.

I followed. From every quarter of camp save the English, other heralds repeated the message, which any prudent military man would have passed in whispers. This was the price Lion Heart paid for allying himself with milksops and

cowards who had neither the heart nor the brains for battle.

Fitted or no, Philip and the others received a full portion of war long before the morning trumpets. I was wakened by hooves thundering in the lanes, clanking armor and cries of alarm. Rolfe stumbled in, eyes round as moons.

"The Saracens! Thousands and thousands, streaming from the hills. Already the rear lines are crumbling."

"Richard feared it," I muttered, buckling on a baldric and a dented but serviceable sword I'd won casting dice with some Flemings. Zoe appeared, sleepy and frightened. I explained that I had to hurry to my position at the siege engine.

"Has the war come at last, master Blondel?"

"Aye, Zoe, but from the wrong direction. The King labored all night to reinforce the rear. Apparently it wasn't enough. Come, Rolfe, let's—"

"Allah! Allah Akbar!"

Down the lane outside rang fresh hoofbeats and the shrieks of the enemy.

Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!

"They're upon us already!" cried Rolfe. We ran outside, straight into the path of the charging troop of Saladin's mounted archers.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DARKNESS filled with the flash of scimitars, fire and pandemonium.

Whole acres of tents had been torched. Outlined against

the hell glare the Saracen archers rode firing their short curved bows at anything that moved.

I flung Rolfe to the earth as they thundered by, then leaped up, hacking high and hard with my sword.

Whizzing darts plucked at my sleeves. I chopped off one Saracen's head. Hot blood rained on me. The trunkless body swayed along a while before toppling from the light wooden saddle.

The other archers were carried out of range by their horses. Down the tent street they encountered a party of Pisan knights. Oaths, screams and the rattle of swords and shields assailed the night. From Acre sounded the rhythmic crash of siege engines operating. Long waterfalls of Greek fire poured off the battlements, lending the scene even more of the look of an inferno.

"The King's pavilion!" I shouted at Rolfe. "Walter may need right arms more desperately at the rear then they do for twisting ropes on a wooden wall crusher."

"Either way, I won't stay behind and be killed." announced Zoe.

When we struggled through the mob that always seeks the King's standard, to protect and be protected in time of battle, blazing torches showed us Lion Heart in full war armor. He was alternately surveying the city and the crumbling lines in the foothills. Trumpets rang. A path opened. Hubert Walter galloped through. Pages assisted him down, when he opened his casque, his red face was greased with sweat.

"My liege, the moment we hurl them back at one spot, four new passages open."

"God's bowels, Walter! Are we to be crushed like a mouse between two cat paws?"

"Unless we breach the walls, that may be the case."

"Then Philip's engineers must enter the tunnels and fire them now. Send a messenger—"

"I'll go in person," Walter cut in. " 'Tis too easy to ignore a messenger."

He rode away, only to return soon with bad tidings.

"I wheedled. I pleaded. I even demanded. Philip will have none. He pointed to the torrents of Greek fire and said he wouldn't offer his engineers as sacrifices to Mars." Walter spat in disgust. "Whereupon he retired into his pavilion, shaking like a leaf in a wind."

"Fop and coward!" Richard cried. "Doesn't he understand we'll all be sacrifices unless something's done? God rot his quavering bones, I'll fire the tunnels myself. Only a handful of men are needed for the task." He clanked his casque shut. "Bring Fauvel and find me at least one engineer."

"But my liege!" Walter exclaimed. "To risk yourself—"

Zoe cried out as I knelt before the King.

"Sire Hubert is right, sire. You cannot go. But I can."

"And I, lord," said Rolfe, though fearfully, as he knelt alongside.

Richard opened the face plate of his casque. What I saw in his eyes was a shining pride in courage shared, reward enough for the perils that would lie in the French labyrinth under the walls.

"We'll make no pretty speeches to you, Blondel. We accept your offer thankfully. We'll go now to the pavilions of the French and bring back an engineer to show you which timbers to fire." He climbed onto the snorting Fauvel and pounded off into the night.

Instantly Zoe was at my side. "Master Blondel, don't go."

"Someone must. It's not because I fit myself so easily into the hero's part—"

"But you court death willingly! When you could have all—" She bit her lip and was quiet.

I touched her arm. "Zoe, when I venture into those pits, I'll tremble as badly as the next. There are many things a singer of cheap songs can't explain. Many whips driving him this way or that, whips whose sting wouldn't seem real to another."

"Is there some great prize to be gained in dying?" Angry tears ran down her cheeks. "Some boon that's yours as soon as the blood runs out of your body?"

In the night of war and fire I could only answer. "Perhaps. Perhaps I have to find out, too."

Suddenly Rolfe exclaimed, "The King has his engineer, Blondel. But look who else!"

Richard had returned with a mounted knight whose plume identified him as a follower of Hugh of Burgundy. Behind, seated on an ass, rode a hunchback with an imperfect right eye. He wore the garb of the engineer.

Richard, the knight and the engineer conferred. Richard lifted a gauntlet to indicate Rolfe and me. The knight unfastened his head piece and removed it. It was Burgundy himself.

Lingering behind the new arrivals, another ugly face glimmered in the firelight. It belonged to Burgundy's squire, Ponti. Hugh the Duke slid his gaze toward me and gave a faint smile even as he and Richard conversed. Then he summoned Ponti. Soon the King beckoned.

"Blondel, the Duke unearthed an engineer. He has also volunteered the services of his own squire."

"Four should be better than three," I said, not mentioning what I thought the real purpose of the mission might turn out to be.

The King placed a hand on my shoulder. "Guard your life well, Blondel, and that of your cousin. Both are dear to us for many reasons."

Rolfe's head dropped in embarrassment. The hunchback engineer, scuttling like a crab, pressed upon us two bundles each of thick faggots. These we tied to our backs. Squire Ponti similarly equipped himself.

Walter wished us well. A hoarse cheer rose from Richard's retainers. The little hunchback led us away from the pavilion down long tent streets toward the plain.

We trudged along with scarcely a word of conversation, already oppressed by knowing where we were bound. In the night all around, companies of knights gathered, hounding their chargers ready to strike the wall if we were successful. The siege engines groaned and hurled boulders through the sky. Ahead yawned the mouth of a connected

chain of mantlets whose other end, so far as I could tell, was swallowed in Greek fire.

"All crawl in here," the hunchback said, hustling us along. "There's a pit leading downward, perhaps halfway to the wall."

The bundle on my back slipped. I stopped, allowing Ponti to sidle past. My nerves strained tight as I bent and followed him into the narrow, sulfur-stinking dark beneath the hide trestles.

Rolfe crawled behind me. The engineer came last of all. Before we had travelled very far on our bellies, the heat became unbearable. Sour rivers of sweat dripped on me everywhere.

The heat seemed to increase. A wanning from the hunchback—the Greek fire was burning the very mantlets under which we crawled.

We went on, nearly suffocating in acrid smoke. A rosy light shone ahead. It was the burning end of our hide tunnel.

Silhouetted against this glare, Ponti scrambled over the lip of a dirt shaft leading into the bowels of the plain. The hunchback urged Rolfe and me to hurry. I crossed myself, as I hadn't done in many a year, and slid over the rim.

Our progress slowed even more. The shrieks of the Saracens on the wall died out. We crept on all fours, shoulders bruised by the narrow dirt walls angling down and under the ramparts. Ahead I heard a French oath. A draught of cooler air laved my cheeks. The tunnel leveled out. We were still in total darkness.

But at least we could stand upright, and breathe. The hunchback struck flint, blew on one of the pitch-daubed faggots until it sputtered afire. Using this to light the way, he led us down the tunnel. It was braced every few paces by heavy cedar logs. Soon it intersected another shaft which seemed to parallel the walls.

"The pair of you take the left branch," said the fisheyed gnome. "Begin at the most distant point. The wood piers are painted with pitch and will burn rapidly. Fire them one at a time. The squire and I will take the opposite tunnel."

He applied his brand to one of mine and one of Rolfe's. I didn't like abandoning the two of them to work together.

"Blondel, this is a dreadful place. It's like being buried alive."

"I know, cousin, but there's the dead end. Ply your torch and let's start back."

I set fire to the timbers blocking the tunnel's end, jumping away as they blazed up. Rolfe mournfully implored Christ to protect us as we traced a swift backward course, lighting new brands from old one left behind. We'd gone only a short way when Rolfe dropped his torch.

"Cousin! Back there! That fire is too near to be—"

"Accursed murderers! They mean to bury us alive. Run, Rolfe!"

I took the remaining faggots from his back and shoved him along. A dancing curtain of scarlet had sprung up in our path. Through it I spied the little hunchback and squire Ponti, vigorously applying fire not to their section of tunnel, but to ours.

Rolfe recoiled from the heat, crying, "We'll roast, we'll roast if we go through!"

"We'll be crushed if we don't! Hear that rumbling? The timbers behind us are falling, and the walls of the city on top of them!"

That spurred him on to the flaming barrier. I stopped only long enough to unlace the Florentine dagger. Fingers tight on its hilt, I closed my eyes and leaped into the fire, dragging Rolfe with me.

He screamed. Perhaps I did too. For a moment the heat was so fierce I thought we would fry in our skins. Then we were through.

I flung Rolfe down, rolling him back and forth to extinguish his smoldering clothing. Gagging, he pointed beyond me. His warning saved me from taking the hunchback's knife in my spine.

The dwarf had been lurking in the shadows at the intersection of the two tunnels. The force of his attack carried him over my arm. I impaled his bowels on the point of my

dagger. I cut him from navel to neck and kicked him aside.

"Ponti? Where are you? Come out and be spitted."

A hateful cry—a leap—a slash of pain down the length of my left arm and he had me on the ground.

He clambered up to hang bat-fashion from an overhead pier that was already beginning to send out tendrils of smoke. Rolfe bleated for help. He'd wrenched his leg and couldn't rise. Along the tunnel, timbers collapsed one after another, with a new sound added, the rumble of buckling masonry above ground.

Ponti squirmed over me. His foul breath blew in my face as he drove his knee into my groin, cut at my face with a knife he'd concealed earlier.

"My master Burgundy—" he panted, "made me swear you'd never come out."

The words burst from between his rotted teeth in sharp gasps, punctuated by the slashing of his arm. I dodged each of the strokes. The point of his blade buried itself in the earth to the right of my skull, then to the left. He held my own dagger hand in a fierce grip, driving his knee repeatedly into my belly until I could barely draw breath.

Ponti heaved with all his might, knocking my knife hand against the tunnel wall. The blade fell away. Ponti laughed and pinioned my throat for the killing stroke.

I had one hand left for fighting. I struck for his eyes.

He shrieked when my thumb tore into his right eye-socket. My fingers slipped in blood and ichor There was a vengeful madness upon me. I ripped his eye from his head.

Blood fountained over his face. He twitched onto his back, kicking in agony. I found the Florentine blade and buried it to the hilt in his left eye.

I pulled it free and thrust it a final time into his heart. I wiped it on my jerkin and finally recovered my senses.

Rolfe's plea for help sent me running back along the tunnel. Too late.

The fire marched forward. A golden rain of it was burning Rolfe's hair. The timbers above him fell.

"Rolfe, my God, Rolfe!"

I screamed his name, rooted in my track by the sight of great burning pillars smashing his chest to pulp.

When all the timbers had fallen they made an impassable barrier between us. I saw him through the smoke, mangled beyond belief, white broken ribs sticking through torn flesh.

"Go, Blondel! There's no hope for me."

I leaped over the nearest timbers. My tunic caught fire. Another timber dropped, narrowly missing my skull.

"No help for me," came his sad, tormented cry above the crash and crumble of Acre's walls. The very earth shook. "Go on before you're buried too. Only let me tell one thing about your mother and—"

The whole world trembled again. Great rocks tore loose from the tunnel roof and buried him forever. I turned and fled for my life.

Time and again I stumbled, on rocks, on flaming timbers. Roar after roar after roar told of the final destruction of the tunnels, an instant after I gained the narrow shaft leading upward to the mantlets. Hideous heat seared the soles of my boots as I crawled. Thousands of hammering hooves added to the din overhead.

I scrambled out of that burning tomb as horsemen churned the dark all around. I saw through my tears that the walls of Acre were down and the mounted Christians storming. But it was no comfort.

CHAPTER IX

Sanctum Sepulchrum, adjuva!
St. George for England!
Death to the pagan defilers!

The fiery night split open with holy cries as the Christian host hurled itself with broadsword and lance, crossbow and mace, at the crumbling ramparts of the garrison. Mounted men and foot soldiers poured around me, outshouting the beaten Saracens invoking Allah. Dazed, I managed to press through the turmoil and find the King at his pavilion.

Squire and knights rode in and out ceaselessly, reporting the progress of the battle in this or that quarter. Never one to draw close to death, Hugh the Duke lingered nearby. I struggled through a crowd of advisers clustered around Richard, rudely shoving them regardless of rank, and fell out of breath before him.

"Your presence speaks of a mission well finished, Blondel. Rise and see how well you have wrought. The host is entering Acre."

"I have no stomach for it, my liege. The price of success was heavy."

Burgundy's shadow fell across the ground before me as I reported that my cousin and the hunchback had perished. Of the murder plot I said nothing.

The Duke was unable to conceal his fury. "What of my squire?"

"My lord, he perished also. Last of all."

I stared Burgundy down, to show him there could be no lies between us.

"In his final extremity, he asked that I hear his confession, and I did so, fleeing only in time to escape death myself."

My eyes accused him. The King's attention was diverted

to the spectacle of the mammoth scaling towers being wheeled to unbroken parts of the wall. Up through the towers on ladders, knights six abreast swept out along Acre's parapets. The Duke's glance acknowledged my accusation. He smiled, a pitiless smile, then laughed low. The laugh said, *I understand your meaning, minstrel. There will come another opportunity.*

A red rage overwhelmed me. I came near to striking at him that instant. He clanked his casque shut, clambered clumsily to horse and rode off in the darkness. But not in the direction of the fighting.

A Templar appeared to announce that Saladin's attack on the rear had finally been repulsed. The line of defense now held. Richard shouted for Fauvel and galloped down among the siege engines to the city, where a few minarets and mosques near the walls had already been put to the torch.

Before the night was long advanced, the black Saracen banners over Acre were struck, all except on which flew over a palace deep in the city. In this palace the remaining defenders had barricaded themselves. Dawn broke hot and gray. Smoke palled the horizon. Emissaries rushed back and forth between the Christian host, the City Garrison and the hill of Ayyadieh. Cheers went up as word was passed that the defenders of Acre had sued for peace. Saladin approved the negotiations out of necessity.

There was little consolation for me in the victory. I preferred to remain near a jug of wine, thinking dark thoughts, barely paying scant attention when Zoe came in to tell me Saladin had accepted Richard's terms. He had agreed to surrender the relic wood of the Holy Cross and more than a thousand prisoners he had taken. The city garrison had finally given up and the last black pennant no longer flew.

"Master Blondel? Aren't you interested in such good news?"

"Leave me alone."

My hand stole to the cithara Rolfe had crafted with such care. I struck a note. It sounded sourly.

"For hours you've lain on your pallet." She knelt beside me. "It isn't fitting."

"Zoe, what isn't fitting is a world that allows a murderer like Burgundy to be impregnable behind a noble rank."

"Didn't you tell me you couldn't prove the attack was his idea?"

"Prove it? The whoreson admitted it when I looked in his eyes. Would God I had armor and a horse of my own so I could challenge him in the lists and—"

The words stuck in my throat. I felt a sudden chill. I had overlooked the most obvious expedient.

"What a simpleton I've been, to dream of courtly revenge. It should be on my terms, not his."

I unlaced the Florentine dagger and tested its keen edge. Zoe whispered, "Master, your face is cruel. Such a bestial expression ill becomes you."

"Looking death in the face ill became my poor cousin." I sank the dagger into the ground beside the pallet. "All I want is Burgundy's soul flying down to hell. I'll strike him when the time's ripe, the way he struck my hapless cousin. Secretly, and to kill."

A great lethargy lifted from my shoulders. I poured wine and laughed aloud. The sound frightened the girl of Tyre.

"Murder shouldn't beget murder, Blondel. Your God will punish—"

"Be silent! I haven't time to wait for a graybeard somewhere in the sky."

"Now you're blaspheming!"

"What of it? I'd embrace Lucifer himself to see that French bastard bleed."

"It's wrong, Blondel. I'm not of your faith, or any faith, really, but I know Christian doctrine well enough to know also that what you plan is a sin. It will scar you forever in the eyes of your God."

"Where were the eyes of God when my cousin screamed for help in the tunnel? Turned the other way."

She touched my cheek. "If there were love in your heart, it would be a balm to heal—"

"The only balm I want is Burgundy's red blood on my hands."

I flung her aside and left the tent, to be free of her prating. In my heart I believed what she said. But there was a black canker inside me that grew and festered. I began to lay plans.

I asked for Burgundy everywhere on the sweltering plain, only to be told that he, and all the other commanders except Richard, had retired to comfortable palaces inside the city. Queen Berengaria and her ladies had also transferred from the ships to similar lodgings.

The King meantime, occupied himself with preparing the army for a march south, despite many warnings that the intense heat of the Holy Land in August would overwhelm his men. He refused to hear of it. He had sworn to retake the Holy City, either in company with his fellow commanders or without them. It was a Herculean task, superintending preparations for transporting baggage and food and arms for several hundreds of thousands, but he threw himself into the effort mightily. I lingered many hours at his pavilion, but there was never a call for rhymes. He was too deeply occupied.

The first time I really saw him closely again was the morning Hubert Walter assembled a retinue to accompany the King on an inspection of the city. I managed to bribe a groom to lend me a donkey for the day. Mounted upon this plain beast, I followed the King's train through the walls, hoping to learn Burgundy's whereabouts.

Following the signing of the documents of surrender, Saladin had withdrawn from the hills ringing Acre. His army was rumored riding south, to anticipate Richard's march. At the surrender Acre had been divided into four quarters, one each under the jurisdiction of Richard, Conrad, Leopold and Philip of France. Richard's train was jingling along in the English quarter when I recalled again Rolfe's strange last words. I urged my donkey and rode up to salute the King as he clattered along the twisted, shadowed streets between shuttered palaces and sinister mosques.

"If the King pleases, I would ask a question."

"Proceed, Blondel." His eyes ranged over the rooftops, seeking what, I could not tell.

"As my cousin went to his death, he cried out that he must speak to me concerning my mother. Since Madame de Nesle said my mother died at my birth, I'm puzzled about what Rolfe meant."

A stern look covered the King's face. "We cannot imagine."

I was stung by his use of the plural. "I only thought the King might possess information I did not, or could explain—"

"Your mother was your mother! Trouble us no more about such—sweet toes of Jesus our Lord!" He stiffened in his red leather saddle. "Is this not our quarter of the town? Why is that Austrian flag flying from that mosque?"

The source of his anger was a pennant of Duke Leopold whipping in the hot sunlight from the pinnacle of a rich Muslim temple. Richard galloped on along the street and drew up before the building.

"Walter!"

From the rear of the train rode the unhappy Englishman. His guilty face showed he had seen, or at least heard about, this stroke of insolence before. Richard demanded to know why Leopold's banner flew above a mosque in his section. Walter fumbled to reply:

"My King, the Duke suffers from a depleted treasury. He appropriated this mosque because it contained much treasure gathered by the learned teachers of Islam."

"Why wasn't such an act of treachery brought to our attention?"

"I feared to tax further an already strained relationship."

"Tear down the ensign. If Leopold wonders why, we'll reply with this." He clanked his sword. "It makes us sick to death, the pettiness of nobles who profane Christ's crusade with greed and cowardice. Speed your knights, Walter. Remove that miserable pennon from our sight."

Reluctantly Walter obeyed. A handful of Austrians on guard inside the mosque fled at the advance of the King's party. Soon the lion banner replaced Duke Leopold's on the

staff. His mood soured by the incident, Richard cancelled plans to ride further into the city and would return to the plain where, he exclaimed in tones of loud contempt, a soldier might breathe honest sweat instead of the perfume of avarice.

Jogging on my hired donkey, I was no nearer an answer to my question than before. Had Richard's anger been provoked by my question or by the flag? Unless I had read his expression wrongly, it was the former. I puzzled much over it.

The provisioning of the army continued into August. Richard's wrath at the indolence of his comrades increased. The French Monarch, Conrad and the Austrian Duke never once appeared on the plain. Instead they dallied on the roof of this or that palatial residence in Acre, attired in luxurious gowns of loose linen. By day they sipped wine kept chilled by ice which Saladin's runners most courteously brought from the mountains in the west. The Mussulman Sultan also provided rich foods, including pears and the fabled grapes of Damascus. None of this would Richard touch. The situation came to a head one morning in his pavilion.

I was in the minstrel gallery, running my fingers over the cithara, making music the King didn't hear. He pored over confiscated Saracen maps which detailed the coastline southward beyond Jaffa. Hubert Walter entered.

"What good news?" Richard inquired.

Walter flung down his gauntlets. "None, my liege. I discovered the whole pack taking ease together in the palace where Burgundy has hidden himself to dally with his ladylove." My ears pricked up. "Philip still complains of fever."

Richard cursed stoutly as any yeoman. "Cowardice is the real name of his disease."

"I'm not in a position to tell him so, my lord, I did, however, pass the news that the host was ready to march, and begged for their agreement on a date for departure. They put me off with jokes. Duke Leopold is much annoyed over the incident of the flag. The whole lot can't abide the

position of leadership the King has assumed. You alone are given credit for the victory of Acre."

Richard flung his map aside. "We did not seek personal glory. It fell upon us by default."

"Regardless of the cause, they bite their gloves every time they see your banner."

"And refuse say when they'll leave to strike Jerusalem?"

"That is so."

"Where are they now? Still in Burgundy's palace? We'll confront them ourselves, and wring a decision out before the sun stands at noon. Page! Fetch our mail!"

My fingers closed on the Florentine dagger laced to my leg. Struggling into his hauberk, Richard showed surprise at seeing me.

"What do you seek of us, Blondel?"

"Permission to ride to Burgundy's palace. Time grows heavy with me when the war engines are silent. I've never seen a Mussulman's palace except from outside."

His displeasure was apparent. "Don't plague us with frivolous matters when the fate of Christ's sepulcher hangs in the balance. If you must come, you have our leave, but keep silent and don't chatter idly."

Had he forgotten so quickly the ways I'd tried to prove myself more than a mere fool? I had no time to fret over it, for his party was soon prepared to depart, fifty knights armed with mace and lance, shield and sword, in case of trouble. Walter also went along. I brought up the rear in company with some squires.

The knights made a splendid sight in their gleaming armor blazoned with the Holy Cross, but their panting and sweating was a bad sign for a forthcoming campaign in summer's full heat. We entered Acre's gate and within the hour Richard had stationed his men in a vaulted antechamber of Burgundy's residence, a pale pink building of many courts, windows and lattices.

Richard went to the roof terrace. I slipped behind a hanging, darted through a window, leaped high and caught hold of a balustrade on the floor above. In this manner I crawled

and clambered up the face of an inner court, sure to be pierced by an arrow if any serving man chanced to pass the tinkling blue pool far below. But none did. I dropped at last inside an empty apartment furnished with soft divans in the Eastern manner.

I stepped into the corridor and located a plump page drowsing on a stool.

"Good page, I have a bill of petition from my master King Richard. I must deliver it to his grace the Duke of Burgundy. Kindly direct me to his rooms."

"That way." The page indicated a distant apartment. "But he's not there. He is on the upper terrace. Give me the petition."

"Oh no." Quickly I closed my cloak. "I have instructions to pass it only into his hands. I'll return later in the night and find him free."

"I doubt it. When he isn't with the Lady Joanna, a flagon of date wine is his companion. Go away and let me sleep."

I did so, but not before I'd seen which outer window would land me nearest the Duke's apartment. The thought of Joanna in his arms kindled my wrath. As I dropped downward and leaped from ledge to ledge, I promised myself Burgundy would have a different lover before the next sun rose, one shaped like my knife.

I returned to the great antechamber none too soon. The King was back already, furious.

"We march south without Philip. If that's not enough bad news, here's more. We march without the whole French detachment, save for ten thousand the King consented to leave behind under Burgundy's command. You should have heard the pitiful squeaks when Burgundy learned he had to remain while his master fled."

Walter was aghast. So were the knights, who muttered of cowardice. One asked, "Will Philip so openly flaunt his weakness before the world?"

Richard glared at Philip's guards, who were listening with poorly concealed embarrassment. "He complains that the

fever had ruined him. He begged our permission to leave. We use the word advisedly. He truly begged. He was close to weeping. We offered him half the plunder of Cyprus if he would stay. Still he refused. Well, *we* refused to grant him leave to go without his giving a boon in return."

Walter and the others wanted to know what sort of exchange had been completed.

"We extracted a promise that Philip would support the claim of Guy de Lusignan to the throne of Jerusalem. That rogue Montferrat will succeed him only upon Guy's death."

"An open invitation to assassination," remarked Walter. "How did Conrad take it?"

"In his usual sour way. No doubt he'll plot and scheme to upset the delicate truce. Come. Let's ride back. Perhaps we're well free of French cowards."

As I followed the party down and around to the courtyard where the horses waited, I heard Walter express further doubt.

"The lack of a French contingent might swing the balance in favor of Saladin when we march south."

"God's cause will prosper even if there are only ten to wield swords," Richard snapped, though without much conviction.

The party mounted to ride out. I asked the King's permission to remain in the city to visit some wineshops. Richard dismissed me curtly, remarking that I was free to go my own way whenever I chose.

I whiled away the daylight hours in a tavern in the English quarter, stoking my courage with Syrian wine. At last the full moon shone. I dropped over the low shrubs as a squad of the Duke's house guards passed through the pool court. When they had gone, I started my long climb upward.

Sweat coated my brow as I stepped lightly into the vaulted corridor which I had visited earlier. Keeping to the shadows, I slipped my dagger in my hand. I neared the entrance to Burgundy's rooms. All at once, a distant gleam of tapers startled me.

In the soft fireballs radiating around the candles I could

make out no human shape. Long shadows twisted and whispered. I pressed to the wall, cold sweat running off my chin. Had I been observed stealing in to do murder?

Suddenly the tapers winked out. A door closed softly. I waited a suitable time, then moved on. It must have been only the passing of a page or serving maid.

I entered Burgundy's apartment, concealed myself behind an arras and crouched down to wait.

Through latticed windows merry laughter rang in the night. I imagined wildly that God was watching, to strike me with lighting when I struck in turn. I only hoped my blade bit before I was punished.

Abruptly the apartment door opened.

A gall of pale yellow light floated in the dark. The person carrying the candle brack was again concealed behind its glow.

I ran forward, dagger up. It flashed like a sword of judgment. The candles fell from a white hand. I wrenched my arm aside down at the last second.

I had nearly struck Joanna's breast.

CHAPTER X

"MINSTREL, WOULD you kill a woman who means you no harm?"

"I had no notion it was you, my lady. I meant to strike the Duke."

"Burgundy? Somehow I can't conceive of you as a murderer."

"He arranged the death of my cousin. I intend to pay him in kind."

"Not so loudly, Blondel! The guards will come and you'll be a prisoner."

"Better the rack than to let a highborn assassin go unpunished."

As we talked in whispers, I was conscious of little but my own surprise and Joanna's lack of it. For a girl of her years to gaze without fright on the naked steel in my fist bespoke an inner strength I hadn't suspected before. All at once the tension of the scene departed. In its place came a sense of weakness, because I realized again how lovely she was.

Her yellow hair was bound in a crespine of netted gold. Her boned gown of the silver silk of Baldacco brought her soft white upper breasts to gleaming prominence. She laughed, brightly yet a little sadly, as she took up the fallen candle bracket and relit the dark tapers from the one remaining afire.

"Blondel, regardless of what the Duke has done, his life isn't worth what revenge will cost you."

"Those are strange words from one so closely allied with him."

Her gray eyes flashed. "I am no more. Have you heard the tale of the French withdrawal? How Burgundy railed about remaining behind?"

"Some such news came to me, yes."

"His cowardice is disgusting. The very name of France is public disgrace."

She paused, stepped nearer, smiling in a pained way.

"Would it be improper for a lady of station to tell a troubadour why she comes late at night to a man's apartment?"

"There's no need. The purpose is obvious."

"You've become cynical at the courts of love, Blondel. Not all women are foolish and weak. I had an assignation here tonight, true. But I planned to carry it only to the point of informing Burgundy that I would no longer receive his attentions."

I suspected treachery, and told her I didn't believe it.

She stamped her tiny leather shoe. "Then you're a worse lumpkin than the lowest stable boy! How do you suppose a woman feels when her lover, a knight sworn to uphold the vows of chivalry, screams like an infant as his sovereign insists he remain and fight? Don't interrupt! I was not brought up to love weaklings. Now you may believe that or no, but at least take yourself out of this palace at once, before you're set upon and killed."

"I will not leave until I've finished my task."

Joanna ignored the remark. Her thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. Why couldn't there be more light in this perfumed apartment? I hated to watch that heartbreaking face float dreamlike in an oval of yellow radiance. She smiled again. This time the mirth was a courtesan's.

"I have a wicked thought, minstrel. What if I failed to be waiting for Burgundy when he arrived?" She touched my arm. "What if I had gone off with another?"

"Don't talk that way, my lady. It's not fair, considering—"

"Considering what?"

"Considering that any low fellow is also a man."

A spark of response, passionate and wild, lit her eyes. What sort of sop was I, to be thus seduced by smiles and glances?

"Aye, Blondel, a man. A man shouldn't sully his hands with coward's blood."

"You plead for Burgundy because he was your lover—"

"He's my lover no more! I plead for your sake. Only listen to what I—hush!"

Her gray eyes rounded with terror. There was a tramp of mailed boots outside. If Burgundy was returning, he had come with a retinue. Drunken laughter rang out. Joanna seized my hand. "Quick! See that arras? There's a passage behind it. Killing the Duke is one thing. Taking on all his friends is another."

We ran to the arras and plunged through the concealed arch just in time. Lights sprang up in the apartment. I heard the rattle of much armor. Joanna led me down a

twisting staircase, black except for the bobbing ball of radiance thrown by the tapers.

A moment later we stepped into other rooms whose delicate, airy furnishings and pale divans told me we were in female quarters. Joanna said, "Clever, these Mussulmen. It's said that the amir who occupied this palace had six favorite wives. Five other stairways similar to that one lead from Burgundy's rooms. Here, drop the hanging into place. We're safe for a time." She set the candles on a cedar taboret and indicated a silver wine pitcher nearby. "Refresh yourself."

"My lady, I can't stay. It places you in danger."

"And if I said I wanted you to stay?"

"Then I'd reply it's only the whim of the moment."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

With grace she poured a silver goblet full to the brim with wine and pressed it into my hands.

"At least drink one cup before you assay the dangers of leaving this house. Once on shipboard I called you a clever fool. Clever you must be, to gain entrance so easily, but certainly not a fool. I took notice of your part in sinking the Saracen ship, Blondel. And I've heard much of your bravery in firing the tunnels under the walls. It's no small pleasure to be near a man worthy of the name. Don't curtail that pleasure so soon."

Having drunk only a little of the wine, I threw the cup on the floor.

"God damn you, woman, I won't be made a plaything. My feelings are too painful."

Any other lady of her rank would have shrieked out and cursed me for addressing her so. Joanna only said, "What are your feelings, Blondel?"

"I love you."

"You don't add the usual courtly phrases. *I love you, my lady.*"

"Because I love you as a woman, the way I'd love a peasant wench."

"Then it's flesh and nothing more?"

"Can't you tell otherwise."

Joanna sighed. "Our stations forbid it."

"Then let me leave."

"No, stay. There is nothing in my station to—to deny you as a lover."

"That's not the way I want to have you."

"Isn't it?"

She stood so close I could taste her breath.

"Isn't it better than no way at all, Blondel?"

With her two hands she offered me her own goblet. I drank. The fumes turned me witless and wild with desire. She lifted the cup to her own red mouth. It was as if a cord had broken. Knowing I was a fool and damned for doing it but helpless when she offered what I'd coveted so long, I seized her.

The silver goblet clanked and rolled off in the dark.

Her arms, so white and soft, crept about my neck. They tightened as our mouths came together.

I kissed her roughly, to prove she couldn't expect courtly ways from me. It only increased her passion.

She led me to the curtained bed, kissing my face. The gown of silver Baldacco dropped at her feet. Her white body gleamed in the candle radiance, her breasts tender and firm and eager to my lips.

Her hair loosened beneath the crespine. It was a gilt chain strengthening my bondage as she offered up her body and I claimed it fiercely. But no more fiercely than she responded.

All the kingdoms of time unfolded before my blind eyes while I loved her, great starry darks and deeps of eternal glory, and I was king of them all for an instant. I clasped her sweet young back and she cried out and no princeling could have stored up riches greater than those we shared that aching moment.

The tapers guttered down to stubs.

The hangings about the bed stirred, lifted by the breath of a south wind. Joanna thought there was a lute of Eastern design somewhere about. After some searching I found it,

and lay beside her and played and sang, hoping to stop the stars from wheeling, time itself from running out.

The song was a pastorela, an old, melancholy tune of Aquitaine. To it I fashioned new words proclaiming Joanna's beauty, the sweetness of her limbs, the white perfection of her breasts, the fairness of her face. As I sang Joanna leaned toward me, her nakedness glimmering like pearl, and kissed me again and again.

Finally I put the lute aside.

"Did you decide I'm not worthy of such lofty phrases?" she teased.

"No, Joanna. But I wanted to be sure of what I was seeing."

"The face of a woman whom your strong arms have pleased."

"That's not what I thought—"

Quickly I resumed playing. She sighed again, almost with relief. For I'd imagined—only imagined; it was impossible that it was actually so—those gray jewels of eyes had shone for a moment with something else besides pure carnality. That one glance was fleeting, soon replaced by the strange, troubled frown with which she confronted me now.

What dreams a gutter scoundrel can dream, drunk with costly wines and the caress of costlier flesh. How could I ever arouse a love that went beyond flesh? Hadn't she said our stations forbade all but the most casual encounter? I pulled on my boots.

"The sky's growing light, my lady. I must leave the way I came."

"And Burgundy?"

"I've lost my taste for blood tonight. Perhaps another time." We both understood she'd won a victory.

All trace of earlier intimacy disappeared as I hauled on my clothes. Ready to depart, I scraped in a courtly bow, the kind with which the low favor the mighty.

"Thank you, my lady."

"Blondel—" Were those tears or just a trick of light from

the dying candles? "I beg you, don't make it sound so much of a transaction."

I mocked myself more than her. "Wasn't it that? We mustn't lie to each other."

"No." Her white shoulders shuddered faintly. "We mustn't lie. Kiss me a last time."

"My lady, no, I—"

The entreaty of those luminous woodsmoke eyes proved too powerful. I brought her into my arms and tried to tell her wordlessly of the torment of taking leave. Her own breath was quick, unsettled. Not daring to see her face again, I clambered over the balustrade and dropped to the garden below. I had fallen more completely into her power than I'd ever planned, and knowing it was gall.

I left the palace grounds over the wall, hurried through the streets of Acre, where packs of wild desert dogs yapped, to the western gates. Zoe wakened drowsily as I entered our tent.

The sight of her fragile and trusting face increased my sense of betrayal. Without a word she lifted the Florentine dagger from where I'd hung it at my belt.

"It's unstained, master."

I tipped a convenient jug of wine and said in quarrelsome tones, "Kindly don't gloat about my failure."

"Gloat? Never, master. I'm thankful to the nameless gods." She dropped beside me, hands clasped in the lap of her shift. "Tell me what stayed your hand."

"Too much time spent in company with my own thoughts," I lied. "I prize my own worthless skin too highly. Had I been caught, I'd have been killed. Besides, what proofs do I have that Rolfe, a gentle creature, would want me to strike back? He was always one to accept the rod of punishment without protest."

"Sound reasons," Zoe agreed. "I'm surprised you never saw them before."

"I'm a fool!" I snarled. My secret thoughts said, *Liar and cheat! Every reason is no reason but an excuse.*

I'd cheated Rolfe's memory not because he would have

wanted it that way, only because I hated Burgundy for possessing Joanna Pembroke. If the love I'd imagined on Joanna's face had been real, it would have given me the strength to speak the truth to poor Zoe, hoping she'd understand. Joanna's eyes had shone so brightly that brief moment—

"You're a wise and kind man, master." Zoe rested her head on my chest.

"Go away!"

"Master, I didn't mean to—"

"Go!" I struck her on the cheek.

Hurt, she obeyed. I heard her sobbing in the corner of the tent. Though I was alreay well sotted with wine, I had guilt enough after some minutes to lurch toward her, shake her shoulder and say, "Zoe? Forgive me. Zoe, please listen. Never again will I raise my hand to you, I swear it."

If she heard, she wouldn't show that she did. I returned to my pallet and disconsolately consumed the rest of the wine. I fell at last into a thick stupor that was my only release from pain.

During the days that followed, the relationship between me and the daughter of the ancient sea kings of Tyre underwent a subtle change.

I spoke to her always in my most polite manner. She reciprocated. Yet she never returned to my bed after that night. Perhaps she sensed she'd lost me. Between us lay a cold gulf bridged only by the trivial necessary conversations of daily life.

But she still depended on me for protection, and followed me nearly everywhere I went.

One such place was a spot on the open plain below the city, a dried creek bed whose narrowness and high banks provided a natural site for instruction in the art of the longbow.

I'd pressed Hubert Walter for a chance to learn to use the weapon. I had no desire to be burdened with the weighty iron tools of war on the forthcoming march south-

ward. Let the knights bear their arms as the price of their vow; I preferred to travel light.

Thus, one blazing morning in early August, Walter, Zoe and I went to the creek bed. At a distant bending I set up a straw target roughly resembling a man. Both Walter and I stripped to our drawers, but the sun and the stifling dampness were still almost unbearable. Zoe rested in the sparse shade of the bank.

"Turn the quill feathers this way." Walter illustrated. "The aim will be truer."

I pulled the bow almost to the full.

"Satisfactory?"

"Yes. Try the fodder man again."

I squinted and let the shaft go. It flew straight, burying in the place a Saracen's throat would have been.

"Blondel, you're the first Frenchman I've met who shows skill with this weapon. I could nearly believe you were born an English archer."

"No, just a scapegrace, but thanks for the compliment all the same."

"Before you loose another arrow, let me say the bow is yours. A gift."

I blinked. "Isn't it your prized weapon?"

He waved a red hand. "One of half a dozen. I'll not miss it. I had the six made by an old man of Wales some years ago. It seems to me your blood and muscle better fit a man of Albion than a gentle son of Aquitaine. Tell me, are you absolutely certain the de Nesles were villeins of our King's father? Couldn't there be bastard blood somewhere—"

A shadow fell over his face. So quietly had the four mounted knights approached that we had heard no jingle of trappings.

The men loomed over us, hauberks burnished by the sun, their jowls running with sweat. Zoe bit her hand to keep from screaming.

"Look there!" said Sturmwulf. "The Englishman is practicing with one of those stick and string toys."

"It can pierce steel and thick hide too, my lord," replied Walter heavily.

"Don't jeer at goosefeather quills until you've swallowed one."

Sturmwulf gazed pointedly at me. "Before that happens, others may feel the bite of Austrian iron."

"Don't quarrel with him," I whispered to Walter. "I'm the one he wants."

Sturmwulf's lance inclined to indicate the huddled Zoe. "I see the whore of Tyre is still with you, minstrel. No doubt to provide other services besides laundering your rags."

Bullying laughter rang out from his companions. Zoe leaped up. "Better to scrub a beggar's tatters than a beast's armor!"

Sturmwulf's mailed gauntlet convulsed on the reins of his charger. "Woman, more of that insolence in front of your betters and nothing will protect you. As for your bedfellow, his poison tongue will be permanently silenced too, one day."

No amount of insult would force me to provoke him into one of his speechless, senseless rages. The odds were too heavy. But neither would I stand docile as an ox. I spat in the yellow dust.

Sturmwulf seemed amused. "At least your answer was brief. I'll answer in turn. But in my own time and my own way."

With a last sly glance at Zoe he spurred off, his cohorts after him. Walter thrust the bow into my fingers.

"Come, Blondel, try more shots. In Sturmwulf's mind knightly vows are a charter to slaughter whoever displeases him. Unless I miss my guess, before long you may have to test these arrows against his mail."

So the instruction proceeded. With several more sessions my eye grew surer, and the target was struck more often than it was missed. Then the time for lessons ran out.

The Saracens were moving slowly in the direction the Crusaders would take, but further inland. Knowing this did not stem Richard's desire to press forward in the worst summer heat. He wanted Jerusalem for his prize before the wretched wet winter set in.

His first objective was the port of Jaffa. Lying nearer to Jerusalem than any other harbor, it would provide the army with a sea base for provisioning before the host turned inland.

Shrunken by one hundred thousand men, the number of French who had already shipped with Philip for Tyre and then home, the army still made a splendid sight as it gathered to await the morning horns announcing the start of the marçh. I looked upon the coming campaign with great eagerness. I could barely tolerate my new, cold relationship with Zoe. Her silence told me of a torment for which I alone was to blame. I heard with relief the news that the King would allow no whores or camp followers to journey with the host.

From a Venetian merchant I secured the name of a dealer in those sturdy metal-bound chests of English oak in which knights liked to store their finest casques. It took nearly my last coin to do it, but I purchased one of the chests. With some rearrangement of the velveteen cushion inside, it would hold my cithara. On muleback I bore the sealed chest into Acre to the shop of a Jewish tradesman who would store it for a small price. Then, turning the mule's head, I loped back to the western gate to wait.

I suspected I would wait in vain. Nearly three days earlier I'd bribed a squire to carry a message to Lady Pembroke. I had received no reply other than the squire's word that he had delivered the note to the lady's chambers. So I prepared to keep a lonely vigil until sundown.

The sun smoldered like red eye through the forest of black banners of the camp. The shadows grew long and purple. I started when a voice called my name from the gloom near a tall pillar.

I ran forward, threw back her cowl and kissed her. In the distance four hundred thousand voices chanted mournfully, *Help, help for the Holy Sepulcher!*

Joanna's face was stained with tears. "Why was there no message all those other days, Blondel?"

"There was none from you either, my lady. I waited many a long night, hoping."

"Did you? Did you?"

Wonder upon wonder, there was happiness on her face. "Turn the wheel of the earth, Blondel. Bring that night back."

I lifted her chin. "Why do you say that? Have there been no caresses from Burgundy lately?"

"If I didn't turn weak in the knees when you stare at me, Blondel, I'd claw your face. Burgundy has neither—neither spoken to me nor touched me since that evening. And I wanted to come to you, but I was frightened. The camp is a wild place."

"And the stings of the flesh were not yet very insistent, eh?"

"Must you cheapen everything, mock it?"

"I mock because mockery is my trade and my fate. But I'm glad to look at you once before Richard leads us out in the morning."

I kissed her again, violently. The next few moments were awkward and terrible. We said silly things neither of us could believe. I hadn't the faith to be sure this noble girl found me more than a lover for a moment. So I told her, "Content yourself with some of the courtly knights too infirm to fight. Perhaps we'll meet again when I come back."

"You make it so light and meaningless. Do you know what I prayed in chapel at dawn today? That a miracle would tear away my title and make me a washwoman so I could go with you. If Burgundy knew—if any of them even suspected—" A bitter and empty laugh sounding forlorn in the shadows growing chilly beneath the high wall. "Lady Pembroke wanting to hurl herself after an army like a common doxy—ah, God, how they'd chortle."

"What's this talk of washwomen?"

"Why, they're the only ones allowed with the host, by Richard's edict."

"I heard all women were forbidden."

She laughed, "A knight must have clean drawers, minstrel, whether his heart is clean or not. What's wrong? You're whiter than the sand of the Holy Headland."

"Nothing."

Except that I hadn't escaped Zoe after all.

We kissed a last time. She wished me Godspeed and I rode away.

CHAPTER XI

OUR DESTINATION may well have been the Holy City, but our road lay through hell itself.

No worse season could have been picked for three hundred thousand men to turn their faces south toward the city of Christ's passion. Once across the Holy Headland of Carmel, that honeycomb of caves and gullies and treacherous cliff-side trails, we knew to a man that ahead lay a decision test of faith and will.

Toward the middle of August the temperatures on that forlorn coast rise so sharply that the blood almost seems to boil inside the body. As far as the eye reached, vast ranks of sweating Crusaders strung out. Nearest the shore, on level sand, the long baggage trains rolled along. The mules staggered and stumbling and bogged down constantly in the dunes. The washwomen travelled on foot there too, but I kept Zoe with me, toward the center of the army. I was fearful she might fall into the hands of the vengeful Sturmwulf again.

Inland from the women and baggage and the footmen who acted as human beasts of burden, backs bent under loads of knightly gear and eyes bulging from their heads, ranged the mounted Crusaders. They were accompanied by

their squires and men-at-arms. Still further inland, directly under the coastal hills, long chains of infantry marched. In the event of attack these crossbowmen were to turn, defend the ranks with their weapons and allow the knights from the center to charge through.

In the army's van were the Hospitallers. The rear was composed of Templars and a sprinkling of Turcopoles, mounted mercenary bowmen. The King travelled in the army's center, surrounded by his retinue under the mighty Standard of the Crusade. This was an immense wooden cross high as the tallest mosque in Acre. It was bound with iron rings, and was so weighty it had to be drawn on wheel by a hundred men.

Directly behind the Standard rode Hugh of Burgundy's ten thousand, and behind these, Leopold's Austrians. The nearness of both lent the journey an air of danger.

And always, swarming like carrion birds, now in sight on the hilltops, now vanishing, galloped Saladin's light horse.

Some said the Saracen army was just over the rise, but it was never seen there. Others said it waited down the coast at Arsouf, the one large obstacle lying between us and the port of Jaffa. At Arsouf, wooded hillocks ran down to the very beach, forming a natural barrier through which the army must pass.

Staggering up steep slopes, along narrow precipices overlooking rocky gorges, through flirty watercourses whose sharp stones slashed even the stoutest footgear, that sprawling, pain-wracked, pestilence-tormented host moved. Progress the first day was only two miles, and the same distance on the second.

The knights were already so weary with the insufferable heat that no progress at all was made the third day. On the fourth Richard's scouts rode back to report the port of Haifa emptied of its populace. Half its buildings had been torched by Saladin's outriders. We stayed two days in Haifa. Additional provisions were brought ashore from the dromonds following us down the coast. Then we turned again toward the inferno.

The knights suffered worst of all. They broiled inside the armor they refused to take off. No man was really safe from the ravages of the heat. It drove many a poor devil out of his head. Such cases were treated by the Hospitallers at the foot of the Standard, and day after day the air was pierced by the shrieks of this or that Christian soldier suddenly going berserk and turning upon his fellows with foaming mouth.

To worsen things, Saladin's harrassment never let up. The western hills were perpetually dark with hundreds of mounted bowmen. And the arrows took a toll.

The great armored sea rolled forward in spite of it all, over the causeway at the river Belius, over the Kishon swamp. Richard decreed the Crusaders must travel more rapidly. Losses to Saladin's archers had grown too severe. Many of the baggage wagons were burned. Many provisions were left behind. Those of less than royal station found their nightly fare to be a mouthful of warm wine and a hardly cooked slab of horseflesh cut from some Christian charger felled by a Saracen arrow earlier the same day.

By early September the army reached and passed through the ruined town of Caesaria, now within range of Jaffa. The seventh morning in September, the Templars, Bretons, Angevins and Poitevins under Guy de Lusignan were the first to enter the dismal scrub oak woods of Arsouf. Saracens by the hundreds dropped on them from the trees.

Richard ordered the war trumpets sounded. The battle we had been expecting had come.

Clouds of dust and hideous screams rose in the sunburnt air. Saladin's forces approached from the west. His strategy was to form his army into a vast crescent. The center was held on the hillsides in reserve while the right horn charged to envelop the Christian rear. The left consisted of the thousands of ambushers in the wood of Arsouf.

Catching a loose horse, I rode after the King to the rear, where the Hospitallers were being decimated by the Saracen bowmen. Riding into the thick of the mingled Christians

and Mussulmen, Richard slashed around him with his sword, crying, "March backward! March backward!"

A Saracen archer charged Richard, controlling his horse with his legs while he fitted an arrow to his curved bow. I flung up the yew bow and shot. The pagan dropped over his mount's flank, clawing at the goosefeather quill piercing his throat front to back.

Carnage and clanging steel were everywhere. Richard rallied the Hospitallers, then thundered back to the Standard with his retinue in pursuit. He ordered six trumpeters out, two into the center, two toward the rear, the last pair into the van. They were forbidden to sound the call for the foot to open ranks and let the knights ride through until Richard personally issued the order.

Within an hour, the commander of the Hospitallers, the Norman knight Baldwin de Caron, flung himself out of the saddle at Richard's feet. He was bloodied and grimy.

"Give us leave to attack, my liege. Our brethren are being slaughtered."

"It must be borne, good master," replied Richard. "Not until the entire Saracen host is within range of the cavalry will charge be sounded."

Fuming, Baldwin de Caron rode back. Another knight raced to the Standard shortly after. He reported that de Caron had been unable to restrain his maddened men. They had stopped retreating and were charging instead. Richard's face contorted. His plan was wrecked. Quickly he recovered.

"Herald, blast the trumpets out."

The six brazen horns rang. A mighty shout rose from the host. Astride Fauvel, Richard lifted his broadsword high.

"St. George for England!"

Countless throats took up the cry. The King rode like a whirlwind to succor the Hospitallers. The hundred thousand knights in the center turned and plunged toward the western hills. The charging Saracen bowmen broke into retreat.

The Christian infantry swarmed after the knights. They lopped Saracen heads and mutilated Saracen bodies until

the plain ran with blood. In Arsouf wood the very scrub oaks which had provided Saladin's left wing with ambush cover now proved its undoing. When the Mussulmen tried to flee, they tangled their gear in the thick underbrush and died shrieking for mercy, crossbow darts sticking out of them like pins.

It became a holocaust of roiling dust, plunging horses, shouting men, spilled guts and armored death. I rode after the King, discharging bolt after bolt from the yew bow. Never had I seen Richard so savage. He was on foot now, both hands clasped on his broadsword. He hewed to right and left, his face streaming with Saracen gore, the face of a devil from the pit.

A frantic pair of hands seized my leg. I fell from the horse I'd ridden throughout the battle. The Saracen bowman fell on top. He started to throttle me.

I tore loose my Florentine dagger as we wrestled in the dust. Powerful, the Saracen deflected the blade and shoved it down into my own ribs, bringing exquisite agony.

In my pain I kicked out. My heel caught his belly. He flew away, flailing. A rearing horse crashed down on his skull.

The Saracen's cracking head drenched me with blood and tiny gobbets of gray. I vomited prodigously. Then I staggered after another horse, to follow the King back to the Standard now that the attack on the van had been repulsed.

I was dazed. Blood streamed down my cut side. Indescribable madness and confusion reigned on every hand. Suddenly I had a glimpse through drifting dust clouds. I blinked, then blinked again. The clouds blew away. Plumes flying, half a hundred Austrian knights raced for the Saracen lines. Across the saddle of the foremost lay the half-naked form of a woman.

No faces were discernible at that distance. I rode furiously to the place I'd left Zoe, a slump of scrub near an extinct watercourse. I had instructed her to hide there in the protection of a small bale of my belongings.

"Zoe! Zoe!"

The noise of steel and screaming flung the sound back. I turned cold. Delivering her into the lustful hands of the Saracens was the sort of vengeance that would suit Sturmwulf. No longer caring how the battle progressed, I kicked my horse savagely up the watercourse, scattering a limping troop of Angevin foot.

I thundered for the distant hillside. At the crest of a low ridge I spied the Austrian band retreating from a company of Saracens etched against the horizon. The knights soon outdistanced the enemy, for huge ram horns were sounding Saladin's signal for retreat. Not a saddle among the Austrians now carried a burden of female flesh.

The knights vanished into the hurlyburly of the Arsouf wood. There the Christians were slaughtering the Mussulmen by the hundreds and thousands. I screamed Zoe's name and rode the harder.

Torn between seeking Strumwulf to slay him and helping Zoe if she were not beyond help, I chose the latter. I rode up the hillside through groups of crossbowmen fanning out to harass the broken Saracen ranks. My mount stumbled and hurled me headlong to the sandy earth. The fall jolted my wounded side. I stumbled up, straight in the path of a wildly galloping band of Saracen archers intent upon gaining the cover of the hills before a company of English knights pursuing them could catch up.

The leading Saracen saw me. He flung an arrow to his bow and let it fly wildly as he rode past.

For the dozen bolts they fired, I shot only one, but it knocked a turbanned giant from horseback. My arrow pierced his shoulder. He still could stand and rush me with scimitar flashing.

I dropped to my knee, pulled another arrow from my hide quiver and shot again. The Saracen doubled, clutching the shaft of wood buried in his belly.

Shouts of warning reached me. I turned my head and choked. The pursuing knights were riding me down.

Terrified, I threw myself away from that hurtling wall of iron and flesh. A hoof hit my skull. I dropped on all fours.

The troop raced by. When I came to my senses more precious time had been lost.

I was like one demented as I hunted for my horse. The animal was nowhere to be seen on all that field of dismembered bodies, severed heads and grisly human remains. Shrieking Zoe's name again. I stumbled toward the crest of the hill. The Saracens' ranks had thinned. Most of those not killed had run away. Above the dusty plain rose the voices of the Crusaders shouting of their victory.

What waited for me on the other side of that crest just ahead? Torture? Death? It mattered little. I was half dead already, losing blood steadily from my side, barely able to totter. If Zoe was indeed beyond help, I could offer my life in payment of the love I had callously rejected.

Delirium claimed me. I had to reach that vague skyline, which abruptly seemed so distant. Each new step I took up the dunes was torment.

Hooves thudded behind. My eyes blurred. I faltered and fell to my knees. The horsemen reined up. Scimitars winked.

There was a sharp command. The swords were stayed while the sweating officer heading the party hauled me onto his saddle.

Sprawled on my belly over the Saracen's racing horse, I saw the landscape flash by, grow dim and finally turn black.

CHAPTER XII

How MUCH time had passed when I wakened again it was hard to say. I was in the same uncomfortable position, draped like a rag across a Saracen pommel.

When captured I had been surrounded by only a small troop of the Muslims. Now I squinted through the dust and saw whole squadrons of mounted archers, thousands and thousands, riding hard over the rough earth and raising much yellow dust. A headlong retreat was in progress.

Occasionally a Saracen, between shrieked appeals to Allah, would point back to the west and cry, "Melech-Ric, Melech-Ric!" This would spur the amirs of the squadrons to dip their great yellow flags as a signal for faster progress.

Up and down watercourses, knolls, dunes, the Muslim army fled at full gallop, constantly invoking that strange name at the top of their lungs. Doubtless they meant Richard. *Melech* stood for *King*. It was one of their few words which I understood. From their fearful yells, I guessed that Richard's heroic leadership had mantled him with the aura of a demon.

Soon the Saracens raced into their own camp. Hastily moved from its former location, it was a sprawling pavilion town erected in the middle of sand. I was dumped from horseback and a jug of wine was emptied over my head. A crowd of Saracens ringed me. Two soldiers searched my person, taking my dagger, yew bow and quiver. About the latter two items there was much chatter I didn't understand.

All the Saracens watching had weapons out. Should I elect to struggle, there were scimitars in plenty ready to cut me down. One turbanned amir pointed at me with his blade and complained, "Melech-Ric."

At once a swaggering young officer in elaborately tooled shagreen boots stepped up. He spat in my face. Then he struck me with his fist. When I fell over he kicked me. The crowd, growing larger each moment, shrank back.

"Melech-Ric, Melech-Ric!" they moaned. The officer cursed them and shook his head vigorously, as if to say that only the English King was to be feared, not I. Gradually the idea sank in. The Saracens drew nearer. Their eyes turned cruel.

"Who speaks the Frank tongue?" I asked. "Find me one who speaks the Frank tongue." I gestured to my scarlet side. "I need linen to bind this wound."

No one moved. The sinking sun cast long shadows across the sand.

I considered adopting a posture of begging or supplication and decided against it. Instead I pointed once again to my bloody jerkin. Raising my arms over my head in the traditional demon posture, I went into a kind of crouch, hissed and rolled my eyes and cried, "Melech-Ric! Melech-Ric!"

At once their confidence faded away. Teeth were bared. Scimitars lifted defensively, flashing in the sundown's red light. Even the swaggering young officer turned pale. He gestured two of his men forward, indicating they should slice off my head.

I bit down on my lips to stifle pain, gathered my leg muscles and sprang into the air in a somersault.

Landing upright with a jolt that made me groan, I again cried the name of Melech-Ric. The sudden movement had startled the Saracens, for they were simple desert warriors. They scattered in terror. One, in his haste, lost his head cloth. I snatched it up and bound strips around me to stanch the blood.

I knew I couldn't continue my little sham indefinitely. I might invoke Richard's name for a year before anyone understood me. But it didn't turn out so after all.

The swaggering officer returned with a portly amir of the cavalry. The new arrival possessed a moon face and considerable courage. He fitted a bolt to his short bow, pointed the shaft at my chest and advanced slowly while his followers crept in behind him.

"Melech-Ric!" I exclaimed, pointing to the heavens for no very pertinent reason.

"Melech-Ric is there." Cautiously the amir indicated the western horizon. "You are not the great devil with the flaming hair, only one of his imps. You lack his power."

"At least we can make ourselves understood," I muttered with great relief, in the bastard Frankish he had employed. Then louder, "Fear me, Mussulman, for I sit at Melech-Ric's right hand."

He deliberated. His reason and his ancient dread of

sorcery warned behind his dark eyesockets. Finally he said, "No. It is your amir we fear. He slew ten thousand of our own and left the corpses strewn for a league along the shore. You are only a man."

The young officer who had captured me gained a measure of confidence from his superior's statement. He promptly jabbered a message to the amir, who translated in turn:

"Mustafa brings the tidings that you were easily captured. Did the noise of battle scramble your wits? Surely you know what fate lies in store." He went on quite matter of factly, "First, castration. Then, burial in the sand so that only your head is in the sun. The desert birds dip down and pluck out your eyes. Next—"

"No dazed mind turned my steps in this direction, but a Christian girl. She fell, or was treacherously delivered, into the hands of your army. She is my woman." I gestured. "I've come to set her free."

The amir's face displayed wonder at so foolhardy an action. Quickly he conferred with several of the men nearby. Though their speech made no sense, I could easily translate the nods and gestures.

"You cannot hide from me the fact that this woman's presence is known to your followers."

His hard laughter said it was so. "Kneel down. We have deaf ears for your pleading."

"Are you afraid to bargain for her life?" I demanded, thinking I saw a way out.

"No bargains with a member of the infidel host! Today Salah-ed-Din's honor was stained with the dung of defeat!"

I pointed suddenly to his bow. "Is that to bring my end? It's too puny. There on the ground by yonder officer is a bow worthy of the name."

"I'll smash it to kindling so it is no longer worthy!" He started for it.

"Careful! The bow was blessed and passed into my hands by Melech-Ric himself."

The portly amir shrank back. While he hesitated I said: "I'll match my weapon against yours. Three shots to

three. If my arrows fly truest, you must pay me by putting the woman on the back of an ass and setting her free."

The amir threw his officer an angry glance. The latter had translated my words to the crowd as I spoke. The amir could not conceal the challenge. I prodded him again.

"Isn't that trifling curve of wood you hold in your hand the famous weapon of Saladin's mounted host? Are you worried that an infidel's skill is greater than yours?"

The amir licked his lips. "What do you offer if you lose?"

"My own life."

"That is our property already."

"True, but if you claim it without answering the challenge, then your honor will soar up to heaven the moment my soul departs my body."

"Infidels don't have souls!" he growled, for lack of any other rejoinder. He walked away.

I waited and wondered whether I had strength left to string the yew bow. He whispered with his officer and a number of other functionaries. At last he returned, chuckling.

"The bargain is struck, Frankish man. Your person in exchange for that of the Christian woman."

"Done." I was filled with a sudden doubt about the outcome. A long lane opened between the ranks. At the lane's end a wood and leather saddle adorned with beaten brass half moons, the symbol of Ramadan, was set in the sand. The amir and I agreed upon one of the tiniest of the metal moons for the target. I was to go first.

The wound in my ribs hurt fiercely. I tried not to show it as I fitted a quill to the rubbed hemp. Before I had drawn the arrow half to full, my shoulders began to ache. My head throbbed. A hush fell on the assembly. The only sound was a distant jingle of armor from other parts of the camp.

In the red light of sundown I strove to compensate my aim for the wind's drift. I stretched the bow further—still further—and let go.

The goosefeather shaft sped over the saddle, a clean miss.

Laughter rang out. Cocking his own shorter weapon, the amir shot without seeming to take aim. His short shaft

chunked into the saddle near the pommel, but wide of the mark.

I readied my second shaft. My shoulders trembled and my brow ran with sweat. I knew I would miss again, and I did.

Stepping up to take his turn, the amir inquired whether I wished to continue the game. I chewed my lip and said nothing. Again he discharged his arrow effortlessly. It struck one of the brass moons between its two horns, but not yet the chosen moon.

My last chance. And Zoe's.

I wiped my face. The dimming daylight fuzzed the outline of the saddle.

I nocked the shaft.

I pulled and pulled until I thought my bones would part at the sockets. I shot. The amir laughed.

An instant later his mirth became growling disgust. Dead on between the two horns of the appointed moon, the gray bolt of Wales stood up, a solid hit.

My hands twitched at my sides while the amir took aim. I anticipated the worst—that he would split my shaft in two. So disturbed was he, however, that he shot wide of the mark as I had the first two times. His arrow sailed out and lost itself against the swollen red sphere of the falling sun.

A thick silence ensued.

"Bring me the woman," I said.

His reply was nothing that I expected. His face twisted in rage, he flung his bow aside and charged me with his scimitar.

"Muhammad's servants do not keep promises to an infidel!"

It had been a sham from the beginning. That was little help. He was lopping at my head and I was capering like an idiot to escape him.

The amir puffed furiously. A moment later a wild idea flashed into my skull. The Saracens surged forward, grunting softly, awaiting the stroke.

The amir raised his scimitar, a red slash of fire in the

sunset. I cried out, "Bring me to the Sultan! Let him settle the dispute. I am his comrade."

So astonishing was the boast that the amir stopped and gaped. He could not even laugh.

"To slay a man whose brains have turned to mud is no satisfaction," he complained.

"We'll see whose brains are mud if you don't do as I ask."

The amir sneered and dashed my hopes. "Mighty Salah-ed-Din has already ridden south."

"Then his nephew! Fetch Takadin. Surely he must be in command of this army! Lord, I promise the wrath of the Sultan's nephew will be great unless you grant me this dying wish. Ask Takadin if he remembers the man who came to the pavilions of the Austrians and cut the knotted ropes."

The amir's mouth slackened. Clearly he'd heard the story. He backed away and conferred with the officer again, this time heatedly. Word of my request spread. Soon the Saracens were whispering and rolling their eyes as they had done when I invoked first the name Melech-Ric.

Disgusted and furious, yet unwilling to risk a wrong decision, the amir sent a runner across the dunes. I stood my ground. The linen around my ribs was already soaked with blood, but I could not fall down before this last trick failed.

Great ram horns blasted presently. A halloo up. A train of horsemen approached.

In the failing daylight I recognized a face I'd last seen when the forehead ran blood beneath a shrouding cowl. Takadin's scowl changed to surprise, then to a reserved smile. He leaped from his mount and ran toward me. His yellow robes of office belled around him. He held me at arm's length.

"Then there is no mistake. Allah has worked in strange ways. You are the minstrel."

"My lord, yes."

I greeted him with the customary salaam, waiting to learn what turn his emotions would take.

He fell to berating the portly amir who dropped to his

knees and begged his lord's pardon. After reviling his underling suitably, Takadin took my arm.

"Let us draw away a little, while I learn what *kismet* has brought you here."

I described in a voice grown weary the abduction of the girl of Tyre, the bargain I had made with the amir and my subsequent betrayal. Takadin's visage darkened.

"Come, we'll go among them again. Small wonder the Christians rout us when we betray Holy Koran and speak deceitfully."

He called the amir and questioned him. Midway during the incomprehensible dialogue Takadin's dark brow drew into a still deeper frown, then ridged with anger. He called a sharp order. The amir was dragged off, flailing and screaming. Takadin turned to me.

"Brother—for such you are, and have been since the night my uncle and I came to your camp—it is fat Oman Kharadif who shall taste the whip and the scimitar, not you. He deceived you. When the amir Oman promised to deliver the person of the Christian girl if you won, his words were true but his meaning false."

The earth darkened and grew evil. "My lord, has he killed her?"

"She was dead when she was delivered into our hands. Her head had been cut off by a mighty sword and her body—" he spoke with effort, "—foully mutilated."

"Let me see her! Show me what they did to—"

"The Mussulman buries his dead, Blondel. She is gone. Do you think I would lie to you?"

"No."

"Take heart, if that is possible. Your life has been spared."

"At the cost of hers." I thought of Sturmwulf, and promised him a final reckoning.

"My physicians will bind your wound, Blondel. We will give you food, wine and good care."

An agony more savage than any I had ever known pierced me to the heart.

"Food would be well. Otherwise I'm all right. Once I've

eaten and put fresh rags to this pit in my chest, I must return to Melech-Ric."

"Do not mention that name here," said Takadin sharply. "As for releasing you, it's out of the question. First, you are ill and weak, despite your protestations to the contrary. Second, your person is important to me. I will not grant you the freedom to return to an army in which you may fall prey to the harrying arrows of my own archers. I promised myself once I would repay you for helping me. I mean to give full measure of that repayment. When King Richard turns aside from his journey to Jerusalem, as he shall, then you may return to him in good health. But not before."

"You intend to keep me a prisoner, then."

"A prisoner? Not at all. I shall guard you as I would a prized possession. Argue no more. My mind is made up."

A last protest sprang to my lips. And died. Takadin's strong features and determined mouth showed his will would be done. He offered me his shoulder to lean upon.

I had no eye for the splendor of the pavilion to which I was brought, no words of gratitude for the healing unguents and balms with which his physicians dressed my flesh. I thought only of Zoe.

I dropped off to slumber with the aged physicians muttering over me, and a distant scream of human agony piercing the quiet of the tent. If the cries were those of the portly amir being tortured for his treachery, they were little comfort.

My life in the Saracen camp was not a joyful one, but at least I was well treated, given the finest viands and sustained from day to day by Takadin's repeated promise that I would soon go free. He understood well, he told me one night as we both sat cross-legged upon divans with ivory chess figures between us, that my promise to destroy the Austrian Baron must be fulfilled. Presently, presently. I took heart.

But I was again dismayed as the days dropped one by one into the well of memory. In spite of its defeat at Arsouf,

Takadin's army was meeting with new successes while the King's march to Jerusalem was turning into a disaster.

From afar I watched the progress of the two mighty forces. They never again engaged directly, yet they were seldom far apart. Saladin's men had been thoroughly demoralized at Arsouf. They shrank from the thought of a similar conflict. But the wily Sultan and his nephew were victorious without such battles.

Not only were the harrying tactics of the Saracens ideal for delaying a ponderous army like Richard's, but the King had enemies within his own camp who brought him greater defeats than the Mussulmen. Or so I heard as the chill and rainy winter of the Holy Land wore on.

After resting nearly half the month of December at Jaffa, Richard's army turned inland toward Jerusalem. The Saracen host with which I travelled retreated from the village of Ramleh, which was burned to the ground, and strung out through the Judean foothills near Jerusalem. Inexplicably, instead of pressing forward, Richard encamped at Baït Nuba. His men never met Saladin's except for isolated skirmishes on the flanks.

Takadin was amazed and delighted when Richard withdrew his army to the seaport of Ascalon. In a forced march the Saracens circled him, no hard trick since the foul weather made visibility poor at more than an arm's length. When the Christians reached Ascalon they found it razed to the ground.

Then came the grimmest mess of all. Takadin's spies informed him that the entire Austrian contingent had taken ship for Acre and home. He expressed regrets that with Duke Leopold's force had gone the hated Sturmwulf, whom I would probably never see again.

Leopold's defection left the Christians with but half their original strength. I imagined the torment and frustrations the King must be suffering, so near to his life's goal and yet unable to reach it. What had caused the swift departure of the Austrians, none of Saladin's people professed to know.

Toward February's close the weather moderated slightly.

The Christians again advanced on Jerusalem by way of Bethany. The Saracens retreated, never forsaking their constant flank attacks, their rain of deadly arrows launched by skirmishers hidden in caves and gullies. The spies said Melech-Ric had suffered yet another weakening of his complement. Ten thousand French knights, pleading impoverishment, returned to Acre under the leadership of a certain Burgundian Duke.

Not many weeks later the Crusaders decisively turned south.

One night in the spring of the year 1192 Takadin summoned me from the tent he had set aside for my personal use. The Mussulman was splendidly attired in robes sewn with pearls. He could not hide his excitement.

"The Christians are in Acre! Perhaps it's cruel to take such delight in it, Blondel, but I'm a general first of all."

"If Melech-Ric hadn't been betrayed by his own allies," I said hotly, "the story might have a different ending."

"True enough. Still, this has come by courier from your King."

His brown hand lifted a scroll all sealed with scarlet wax into which lion devices had been impressed.

"The King requests a meeting with my uncle, at which the right of entry into Jerusalem for Christian pilgims will be negotiated."

"Then he's given up? What misery he must be in!"

"A valiant warrior can only do so much if he commands cowards," Takadin replied. "I have spoken with my uncle. We intend to reply favorably to Richard. You will be granted your freedom, to bear our message back to Acre."

I was silent. Takadin leaned forward. "Doesn't the prospect of liberty please you?"

"With my enemy sailed to his homeland and my King shamed by defeat, there's not much left to rejoice over."

Takadin stroked his chin. "While he breathes, a man must live."

"I can't deny it. The effort sometimes seems harder than dying. I shouldn't speak so. I owe you much."

Takadin smiled. "Our debt is cancelled. I will give you a purse, a horse, and sword when my scribes have prepared our reply to Melech-Ric's proposals."

We said farewell in another three days. I set off to ride through the dismal spring rains to Acre.

CHAPTER XIII

EVERYWHERE IN the Christian camp were signs of poverty and sickness. No lusty martial songs rang out. Eyes that had once been fired with zeal now turned in sullen suspicion to watch a ragged stranger ride by. Unrecognized, I entered the walled city.

I redeemed the chest containing the cithara from the merchant. Then, because I couldn't bear to look upon the King without first learning of his state, I sought Hubert Walter.

The stout general goggled, then regarded me sullenly.

"What specters have the Saracen whoresons sent to mock our defeat?" he mumbled.

"No ghost, Walter. I'm a messenger from Salah-ed-Din himself."

I presented the Sultan's pouch, Walter didn't bother to open it. His flesh had shriveled on his body and he was very pale.

"The King thought you dead, Blondel. So did we all." Rain pelted the pavilion, a mournful sound. "But there wasn't time to grieve over you. Wait. Sit yourself down. I'll

despatch a page to the King with word of your return. Better to prepare him. He's had shocks enough to last ten lifetimes."

As soon as the messenger departed, I inquired whether Walter didn't wish to open the documents from the Sultan. He lifted a hand in disdain.

"Whatever the terms, the King will no doubt accept them. Don't be surprised when you see him. He's greatly changed."

"For the worse?"

"What else? He saw his one great hope dashed back in his teeth."

I related how I'd come to fall into Saladin's hands, and how I had watched the maneuvering of the armies from a distance. Walter regained a little of his fire, pounding one fist into an open palm:

"At Baït Nuba we were within two marches of Jerusalem! That's when they fell on the King. Like a pack of hounds, all crying that besieging the city was impossible."

"Difficult, not impossible. Saladin's forces were thinly spread."

"So the King thought too. But that pretty fellow Burgundy connived with the Grand Master of the Templars and Hospitallers, and they outshouted Richard. Hence our retreat to Ascalon, where we lost Leopold and the Austrians."

"Together with the man I mean to kill one day."

"If so, you'll have to travel a long road. They've all sailed back to Europe. When the King found Ascalon burnt, he set the army to rebuilding. He lent a hand himself, insisting that every man must work, noble or commoner. This choked in the gorge of the Duke Leopold. He replied to the King that he wasn't the son of a carpenter or a mason. Whereupon—" Walter sniffed and brooded. "Richard struck him. 'Twas a rash act. But I'd have done the same. Leopold would not brook the insult. He ordered his dromonds to Ascalon and thereby cut our striking power in half."

"Then the Burgundians retreated," I said. "Or so Saladin's secret agents reported."

"That was another pretty quarrel. Hugh pleaded that his coffers were empty. He said his knights wouldn't fight without pay. In another extreme state of anger Richard refused to loan him funds. He demanded the French remain out of faithfulness to the cross. I think you know to what Burgundy is faithful. Chiefly the safety of his own pelt. He came back here to dally with his ladies."

The memory of Joanna had helped sustain me during my imprisonment. Now I wondered whether she would dismiss me with a laugh. I didn't dwell long on the problem then, for Walter was relating yet another disheartening piece of information.

The King had decided to retreat all the way to Acre because an internal dispute had broken out among the garrison left behind. A contingent of Pisans, men who swore loyalty to Lion Heart, were besieged in the city by Genoese knights following the persuasion of Conrad of Montferrat. The dispute arose over division of spoil. Walter explained that Richard paid a heavy price negotiating for the lives of the Pisans:

"He wanted to let the Pisans fight, and bring matters to a head with Conrad. But he has seen too much suffering. And he isn't a man heedless of human life. The Genoese demanded Richard withdraw his support of Guy de Lusignan and agree to let Conrad hold the Jerusalem crown. Richard granted Guy overlordship of conquered Cyprus instead. Conrad hasn't learned the news. 'Twas only settled a night or two ago."

A hanging lifted. A page entered. "The King requests the presence of his minstrel, my lord."

"Don't leap so eagerly, Blondel," said Walter. "I warn you he isn't a pretty sight."

The warning was not an empty one. As I knelt in the King's pavilion, he met my ill-concealed shock with a bitter smile. Like Walter, he had lost much weight. His samite tunic looked tawdry. His auburn locks were unkempt. Worst of all were the scars he bore in his eyes.

"Friend of my youth," he said gently, bidding me sit

near him. "When the messenger came a while ago, I thought it some drunken knight's jest. Lift the cup with me. Then send yonder man to fetch the cithara if you still have it. Play while you relate your adventures. The documents from the Sultan can wait. I'll be bound to agree to practically any terms now."

Even the finest mead from his private stores tasted bitter as I sat by him, the cithara plunking softly. I told him what had befallen me during the past months. Richard leaned back and closed his eyes.

"How close I was! Only the wrangling of petty tyrants forced me back." Cords of muscle stood out on the backs of his fists as he closed them. "On the retreat to Acre a knight approached and said that if I rode to a certain nearby hilltop, I could see the spires of the Holy City through the rain. I would not. Those not worthy to win Jerusalem are not worthy to behold it. Now, if Saladin will grant Christian pilgrims the right of unimpeded passage there, I'll be content."

"I think that is the promise of the documents, my liege. And perhaps in the summer the army can turn again."

"No." It was softly spoken, full of pain. "Unless I wish to abandon my people, I must point my galley toward England. Leopold and Philip in Europe are conspiring with my brother John. Couriers arrive almost daily bearing tales of an impending campaign to seize England and my French lands. Even the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VI, has given his tacit consent by refusing to raise his hand to stop them."

No longer had I the heart to play foolish tunes on the cithara. I laid it aside. Though Richard spoke to me easily and without reserve, as he had in our boyhood, I felt cut off, helpless to do anything to lessen his burden. But I had to offer.

"How can I aid the King in this grim hour?"

He thought about it, then brightened a little.

"By sparing me one indignity."

"My liege needs only ask."

"I'd planned to go in person to Tyre, to inform Mont-

ferrat of the terms under which I will support his claim to the kingship of—"

"Montferrat is not worthy to stand in the King's shadow," I interrupted.

"Be that as it may, satisfying his greed will remove one less enemy from the ranks already formed against me. His new kingship and his difficulties with the religious cult should keep him busy."

When I asked about the cult of which he spoke, he reported that it was a band of insane fanatics who dwelled in the mountains beyond Beyrout, known as the Hashashim, or chewers of hemp leaves. The leaves induced wild visions in the cultists, in the course of which they would even destroy themselves if their leader, an aged devil called the Old Man of the Mountains, requested it.

"Two of the Hashashim travelled to Tyre on some errand or other. They were arrested and slain for ranting about their master's might in public. The Old Man of the Mountains appealed to Conrad for reparations, to be paid in gold. Conrad ignored the plea. The Old Man has sworn to kill him."

"I'll go gladly to Conrad, my lord, if you think a lowly minstrel can perform the errand."

An odd, penetrating light flashed in his unhappy eyes. "Never question trust, Blondel."

"Yes, my liege."

He gestured wearily. "It is good to look on your face again, Blondel. We rejoice in your good fortune in Saladin's hands, and regret that your enemy has fled to his Austrian home. Take comfort in the fact that you may still serve us."

The natural way in which he slipped into the royal plural told me our moment of companionship had passed. All fears and disappointments were again locked back inside the prison of his skull.

"Leave us now. The hour is late. When the messages for Conrad in Tyre are ready, within a day or two at most, we will summon you."

Bending the knee again, I retreated into the rain. If I'd

hoped to draw strength from him, it had been a rash hope indeed.

I trudged toward the city, hardly conscious of where my steps carried me. Abandoned siege engines towered in the dark like the skeletons of ancient beasts that once roamed the earth, monuments to Richard's failure. And to mine, for I shared his defeats.

Prince John turning against him in England was indeed a dangerous threat. If the King remained in the Holy Land, he might one day find himself a king uncrowned, all his lands stolen. That must not happen. John was a weakling, and would only maltreat his subjects as greatly as Richard's reign had blessed them.

Through the dismal streets of Acre I wandered on. A tapster, for a price, gave me directions to the palace in which Queen Berengaria and her ladies were quartered. Nearing it, I spied a party of mounted French knights jogging under a lanthorn. I crept closer. One was the wicked Burgundy.

Had he reclaimed Joanna? The thought drove me to scale the palace wall and bribe a scullery boy. With eyes round at the sight of my Florentine blade, he showed me which ledges to use to reach her apartment. I swore him to silence, then leaped high and clambered up slippery stone.

The night yawned under me. I nearly fell once, but my passage was aided by soft light falling from a lattice overhead. At last I dropped onto the balcony outside the lattice.

Through the stone tracery I observed Joanna. She wore a white gown and was sleeping mercifully alone.

With stealthy steps I crept round the lattice. Rain dripped from my disreputable cloak. I shook her. The pale eyelids stirred. Again, gently.

Her eyes flew open. She bit her hand in terror.

"God be mercifull" She burrowed under the coverlet.

I laughed. "There's no need to be frightened, my lady."

Beneath the white nightdress, the firm, warm breasts I remembered so well gradually slowed their frantic rise and

fall. She studied me a long moment. Her fright and disbelief melted. A bit of her courtly composure returned.

"I had thought you killed at Arsouf, Blondel."

"I was a temporary captive of the Mussulmen, my lady."

I recounted my term in Takadin's custody, omitting mention of Zoe and letting Joanna believe, though I never said so outright, that I was seized in battle. Truth to tell, I dragged out the story, for I was reluctant to hear her say what I knew she would—that in my absence her brief affection had been forgotten.

Suddenly she hid her face in the bedclothes again, as free of dissembling as the lowest bawling milkmaid. I dropped beside her.

"My lady, I'm hurt that you weep over my return."

"My name is Joanna. And there's too much between us for teasing words."

"I'm afraid to speak any other kind. I don't want to learn of your changed feelings."

Flinging her yellow curls against my shoulder, she huddled there, stifling her weeping.

"I was in agony when the first news came from Arsouf. Now—" there was misty horror and forlorn hope in those autumnal eyes, "—I wish you hadn't come back."

She leaned near, trying to speak out but her tongue was somehow powerless. With a little lost sigh and a shudder that said her passion had risen, she forced her mouth against mine.

Her arm crept round my neck. What I'd planned was to see her once, caper a bit to show her I harbored no ill feelings, then steal away, concealing the ache with which her beauty would forever burden me. The soft prison of those two arms held me fast and cracked my will.

I bore her backward to the bed, nearly a wild beast in the way I fondled her. "Why shouldn't I have returned? Is a commoner's touch so unpleasant?"

"Don't ask that, my darling. I beg you, don't ask. Kiss me."

I touched her cheek and tried to fathom those gray eyes.

"Joanna, be careful. It's better you feel nothing than open

yourself to the suffering that comes from knowing there's an abyss between us neither can cross."

She kissed my hand, pressed it to her mouth. "Blondel, I'm frightened. There are terrible forces back of what's happening to us. Forces to maim and hurt." She searched my face again. "We'll pay a price one day. A worse one than you can guess."

"Then give me word and I'll take my hand away."

Her answer was to hold the hand and draw it tight against the silk of her breasts. Below in the rainy court, a palace guard cried the hour.

"The morning will come soon, Joanna. This may be our last time together. Tomorrow the King is sending me to Tyre, as his emissary to Conrad, with word of—"

"In God's name hush! I don't want to hear about it!"

When I asked why she was so distraught, she wouldn't answer, only begged me to say no more. The light I'd seen in her eyes a moment ago was erased by a fleeting guilt.

"God help me for falling in love with a minstrel."

"And God help me not to die from losing you. I know I will."

"Stop time, Blondel. Stop it and kiss me."

I think I might have broken her young body with the ardor of my embraces, had not she been so ardent herself. Some tormented passion seemed to drive her to me and pull her away at the same time. Her yellow hair clouded my eyes. The flesh if her neck was sweeter than a comb of honey to my lips.

I covered her, with no thought of the hopelessness of it. Our blood heated. All the torment yet to come was worth that instant of shared glory.

Afterward, we dreamed away the lonesome rainy hours before dawn, naked and close and warm. We pretended aloud how we would travel. Where we would go. What we would name our sons and daughters, were she a shepherdess of Aquitaine or I some noble's bastard, entitled to wear the pointed slippers and collar of ermine.

Then it was dawn, oppressive with its continuous downpour. And there was the old puzzle and quandry. Was she a supreme actress? Was all I'd heard from her mouth when it writhed against my face only imagination?

As the house stirred Joanna arranged for a livery of the Queen's service to be fetched, I donned it, pulled the cap low over my forehead to conceal my face, and bade her a formal farewell.

"Blondel, I want you to believe I've never meant to hurt you."

"My lady—"

"Will you stop that insufferable address?"

"I can't. It's a good reminder of how we'd better not delude ourselves. Don't worry. I hold no grudge. I never could. I came here of my own will. If there's pain as a result, only I'm to blame."

"That's not what I meant. I meant a woman is weak. Sometimes she cannot help what—ah, there's no use."

The last view I had of her was a portrait in the gray lights of morning through hallway lattices. She stood with hands knotted at her breast, cheeks still scarlet from the night's love. Why had she seemed to suffer so deeply? I wondered scurrying down a back stairs, never given a second look by those of the household staff I met. Could it be—God give me the will to believe—that she loved as deeply as I?

A fool dreams many dreams. Most smash and shatter under the impact of reality. Mine did at Conrad's court in Tyre.

Upon leaving the palace I returned to Walter's pavilion, to be available instantly when Richard called. He did so before the day darkened. I boarded a galley and sailed north at nightfall on a choppy sea for the old Phoenician port.

The galley was nowhere as speedy as Richard's, however. The master reported next morning as we warped into Tyre's bustling fogbound quay that a swifter ship, apparently without flag, had passed us during the night.

I thought no more about it until I was ushered into the main hall of Conrad's palace. It was a draughty place, befouled by dampness and polluted with too much incense. The fox himself lolled on a divan in the Eastern manner. He accepted into his limp hand the sealed documents I presented on bended knee. He read them, then scrutinized me.

"Once, Master Blondel, we would have received you in a most unfriendly manner. This news of Richard's grudging acceptance of our claim to the Jerusalem throne moderates our attitude somewhat. We bid you make yourself comfortable for at least a night."

"I gratefully accept, my lord. The sea journey was rough."

"Aren't the lowly hardened to the buffetings of fate?" said a familiar voice.

I whirled. Hugh of Burgundy stepped out of the shadows.

"Once or twice they may escape the heavy knocks of fate. But not forever. What say you, minstrel?"

"That I'm startled to see you, my lord. I observed you in Acre only last night."

"Perhaps it was another and you were drunk. I hear it happens often to buffoons."

Why was the Duke here? Moreover, how had he come so swiftly? Then I remembered the phantom ship, and other things as well.

Was that what she meant by suffering? The guilt of betrayal?

Though I couldn't grasp the whole of the web she and the Duke wove, certain strands stood out clearly. No one knew of my passage to Tyre except Richard, Walter, the galley captain—and Joanna.

Conrad said, "Minstrel, retire and await our pleasure. Minstrel! Have you been struck dumb?"

"His natural attitude, my lord."

Burgundy chuckled, hating me with his eyes.

Before I could reply the hall doors crashed open. A wild-eyed page rushed in, prostrating himself before Conrad. He was so hysterical he had to be quieted by others of his

rank following. One lifted from his clutching hand a small, dry cake of barley meal.

"Sire, this was discovered beside your bed a moment ago. How it came there no one seems to know. We have ordered a double watch placed at the gates."

Conrad was white as a skull. "Order a triple one. And silence that sobbing hulk!"

Burgundy raised a delicate eyebrow. "How can a cake of barley strike such terror, my lord?"

"It's no ordinary cake." Conrad was unable to tear his eyes from it. "It's a sign and a warning. It means that the man who receives it will die within a week under a knife wielded by the followers of the Old Man of the Mountains."

CHAPTER XIV

THE DARK face of death revealed itself before that same night was done.

In the splendid central hall of a palace belonging to one of Conrad's followers a banquet took place. There were lavish viands and a guest roster comprised of all the petty lords of Conrad's little enclave. Earlier that day I had been shown to a spacious apartment where new clothes awaited me, a gift from Montferrat. There was also a big-breasted Tyrian girl at my disposal.

But I had no desire for her. I was apprehensive about Hugh's presence, not to mention Joanna's role in the game. Had she informed the Duke I was coming here?

Nonsense. It must be plain coincidence. So I consoled myself, whiling away the time till I was summoned to travel across the city with Conrad's retinue.

At dinner he and Burgundy appeared to enjoy themselves immensely. They applauded lustily when Tyrian girls wearing gilt bangles and nothing else appeared to dance. I was too uneasy to have a good time. I decided I should have boarded the galley and returned to Acre rather than linger. At dawn I would do so.

I also didn't care for the appearance of the retainers with whom Hugh had appeared at the festivity. They were a coarse crew, even though their buskins were of fine stuff and their cloaks agleam with enamelled pendants. There were about a dozen of them. One chose to take his meal near me. He frequently cast over flat, chill glances, menacing for their very lack of emotion.

And when this rascal noticed me watching him, rather than the naked breasts of the dancers, he champed his teeth on a suckling's bone, snapped it and made a great show of throwing away both halves.

"Come, minstrel!" Conrad called when the dancing was over. "Entertain us."

Reluctantly I approached the dais. "I have no instrument, my lord."

"How about your head, knave?" said Burgundy. He was in his cups. "'Tis as wooden as any cithara."

"Your remark's unseemly, Duke," Conrad mumbled, considerably besotted himself. "He brought us welcome news of the English king's consent—"

"Consent by coercion and bribery!" said Hugh loudly. "He gave in to your wishes only under extreme duress."

Angry grumbles from a few of the assembled lords agreed with him. Burgundy preened himself over such public admiration. I waited for Conrad to speak again, troubled. Could the hand of Philip of France be working the Duke's jaws?

"Play what you will, upon a lute my squires will bring," ordered Conrad, though in such a surprisingly agreeable way I had to consent. Perhaps Richard's change of position had

softened him. If not, the wine had. I took the lute and performed a partiman on the topic of courtly amour. At the end Conrad flung a meager purse and returned to his wine.

I withdrew to my place. Burgundy, although deep in conversation with those around him, kept careful watch.

Long after many a fuddled guest had fallen asleep where he sat, Conrad tottered up to begin the journey home. His host begged him to stay. The streets were dangerous at night.

"Dangerous?" Montferrat bellowed it, blazing drunk. "Haven't I stout arms and strong steel to ring me on my way?"

His servants exchanged fearful glances as he stumbled from the chamber.

In the street outside the gate a chilling mist curled, running like a gray serpent up the steep, silent streets of Tyre. A lackey brought Conrad's chair while he relieved himself against a wall. He delivered a swift kick to the breech of one of the chair bearers.

"Begone! My head's cloudy enough. I need the night air. Fetch a linkboy or two and we'll walk awhile."

"Your Grace, it isn't safe to be abroad, especially since the barley cake—"

"Are you my equal, lout, or only the captain of my guard? Montferrat chooses to walk and that closes the matter."

Burgundy approached. His retainers were gathered silently in the shadows. "Pray let me accompany you, in case of difficulties."

"So you wish," blubbered the other. He linked his arm in Burgundy's and set off down the cobbled way, weaving to and fro, singing a bawdy tavern ditty.

When Conrad again paused to relieve his bladder, Burgundy turned, raising a gauntlet. In the dim glow of torches going before, his bullies ran by on silent feet, past the group of Conrad's men with which I was walking. No one thought it odd of Burgundy to summon his guards. The passageway ahead was dark and steep, reeking with gutter smells.

The hackles on my neck lifted as the linkboys toiled up the cobbles. Careful to conceal the movement, I loosed the thongs of the Florentine dagger, just in case.

Half way up the tortuous passage between high shuttered houses, my foot slipped on a rotten cabbage. Picking myself up, my eyes happened to be at a certain angle. Over Conrad's head I saw an unlikely sight—a pair of white eyes that appeared to float next to a metal sign painted with Arabic characters. While I looked, the nightmare took form!

The white eyes belonged to a hideous face, the face of a man in voluminous black robes. He had been lying in wait, clinging to that sign and the side of the building. With a crazed scream he dropped like a bird and drove his knife into the throat of the first linkboy.

Five more of the mantled killers swarmed out of nowhere. *Hashashim!*

The second linkboy perished with his bowels spilling from his tunic. Pitch black fell, except for the faint radiance of a tavern lanthorn far away. Screams and cries rent the night. I thrust two of Conrad's stupefied retainers out of the way. A man collided with me. Sharp nails dug in my throat. A sweet drug smell assailed me as the assassin strangled, moaning like some wild animal. I slicked his wrists and gutted him when he dropped his grip. Then I ran on.

Another of the devils in billowing robes loomed between me and Conrad. The assassin whipped a knotted rope over my head, tightening it with a swift cross of his wrists. My eyes bugged out. I cut the cord and gasped for air. The attacker's dagger winked. I dodged his arm, spun and gave him steel to the hilt. My blade scraped against his backbone.

"I'm struck! I'm struck!"

That was Conrad. He lurched over, dying even as the black blood gushed between his lips. I'd seen a certain sword dip and flash an instant after I killed the second Hashashim, but there was no time to speak of it. Men set up a wild halloo.

"They're escaping! Montferrat's murderers are escaping!"

Another voice cried them down, "No! He's still among us. Here."

A hand closed over mine; mine that still held the gory Florentine dagger.

Hugh of Burgundy twisted my arm. "This is the messenger, masters. Come with a steel gift from Lion Heart."

"Liar!" I shouted. Angry black shapes closed around. "One of your own rogues hacked him to death. I saw him."

"Point him out."

Burgundy threw back his head and laughed when I kept silent.

"Naturally he can't do it, masters, since he committed the foul act himself. On instructions, no doubt."

"Stop those assassins running yonder!" I said. "They can tell which—"

"I say *you're* guilty! Whom do you think these gentlemen will believe, minstrel? You, or a Duke of the Burgundian realm?"

I had my answer in the growls from those close by. And clear as a bolt of lightning I had the plot in full: Joanna had betrayed me to Hugh. He'd taken ship at once, in order to arrange the assassination which he doubtless would have carried out even if the Hashashim hadn't fortuituously intervened. Around me men said:

"Lion Heart sent his butcher to take back what he granted Montferrat."

"Aye. It's widely known that Richard's support was forced."

"That such a beast should wear a crown—"

"Perhaps he won't much longer," Hugh said, the moment I broke free of his grip.

I stabbed one of his men. The packed mob shifted and stumbled. I caught the neck of the dead man and flung him out of the way, leaping over the shoulder of the next in line. I raced up the slimed street toward the ghost glow of that distant light. The billowing robe of the last Hashashim had just fluttered from sight in an archway.

My life now depended upon speed. I dodged through the open arch into a sunken court. Behind, Burgundy and the others gave chase. Only their confusion afforded me a slim margin to catch one of the real killers and wring out the truth.

I heard scraping overhead. Blurred against the jumbled

rooftops, robes flapped like wings. I climbed a pillar, ran along a balcony, leaped and caught a parapet. I was on the roof.

Three of the murderers were at the opposite side, ready to jump to the adjoining house. I ran. One jumped. Then the second. I caught the third.

My hands tangled in his cloak. I hauled him back. He swung round with the strength of the demented, hand flashing, full of steel.

The blade raked my jaw. I cut for his fingers and missed. The footfalls of the others pattered off in the night, leaving me locked in death struggle with this one drug-ridden madman.

The stories I'd heard of the prowess of the Hashashim when under the influence of hemp must have been true, for this wiry devil wasn't half as tall as I, yet he possessed strength that matched or outstripped mine. He fought with his dagger, his teeth, his feet. I held his knife hand, he mine. We swayed across the roof, lurching dangerously near the edge.

Torchlight leaped up in the street. Burgundy cried out, "There above! Let me pass—!"

In the courtyard many men were coming. The Hashashim gave a mighty lunge, breaking my grip. I stumbled. I struck my skull on the parapet's rim. He dove on me. I balled my body and rolled.

His leap carried him against the parapet and flattened his nose. He shrieked hideously. I stabbed the Florentine knife straight down through his wrist and into the roof.

Pinning him thus, conscious of the flare and dip of torches ascending an inner stair, I kicked his weapon away. I straddled his chest, and released his wrist. I gave him the dagger point in the middle of his throat. His lips were coated with foam, his eyes vacant.

I tried a dialect taught me during my stay with Takadin, "Do you hear the houris of your paradise inviting you to visit? Who struck the Tyrian lord?"

"Infidel!" His spittle flew in my face.

I pushed the point further in his flesh.

"*Who struck?*"

"Enough, enough!" His fanaticism was not so overwhelming after all. Voices and a clatter of feet sounded on the staircase. No matter. In another second or two I'd have my answer.

"Quickly! Did you see which knife killed Montferrat?"

Men rushed toward us. The Hashashim strained up.

"I saw, yes, it—"

The terrified creature gazed over my shoulder. His body stiffened. I cut his chin deeply.

"Speak, Mussulman! Or I promise to heaven you'll—"

It was of no avail to threaten death. He had already been summoned.

I turned my head to the smiling countenance of Hugh of Burgundy. His right arm was flung out, holding the rest of the party at bay. Concealing the body of the Hashashim with his cloak, Burgundy had driven his sword down into the man's guts.

Behind cover of the cloak he returned the sword to its sheath with no one being the wiser. "Here's our quarry, trying to lighten his doom by killing again!"

Anger made me a wild animal. I lunged for him. He saw my knife coming, whipped out his sword and knocked me on the side of the skull, as if he'd just drawn the first time.

I dropped to one knee, clutching my head. Burgundy leaned close.

"Death now would be too easy. It will come later, following pain. Much prolonged pain. *Take him!*"

Strangely, although they bludgeoned me and kicked me, I thought not of my hatred for them, but of Joanna Pembroke, and how she must have laughed in Burgundy's arms when she told him of my mission to Tyre. A boot caught my ears and snapped my head over. That was the end.

Pain pulled at my shoulders when I woke.

The cause was a pair of manacles fastened so tightly around my wrists they drew blood. The manacles were at-

tached to chains mortared in a masonry wall. I hung, and my toes barely scraped the cell's filthy floor.

In the gloom reddish eyes gleamed. A Tyrian turnkey brought a light and a butt of bread soaked in wine, which he thrust between my teeth. He told me I was in a donjon of the palace of the murdered Conrad, under sentence of death. Then he went away and took his light, and the rats came out again to crawl over my feet.

CHAPTER XV

I SPENT many days and nights in that pestilent darkness. But after the first few visits of the jailor, I lost count of his comings and goings.

Bizarre colors filled my dizzy head, followed by a wish that the turnkey's footsteps would be instead the footfall of an executioner. I'd harmed the King greatly by failing to extract a confession from Conrad's assassin. Finally several men with cloaks bearing the white cross of England filed into the cell. The turnkey thrust a blazing brand up near my face.

One of the men choked. "He looks like a boneyard and stinks twice as badly."

Fussing with the iron cuffs, the turnkey whined. "He's eaten very little."

"Better he starve altogether," was the reply. "It's a disgrace to take such filth to the King, considering the damage he's wrought."

The turnkey goggled, releasing my wrists. "Lion Heart is in Tyre?"

"Aye. Fresh returned from Damascus where he negotiated an end to the war with the Sultan. The citizens of Tyre snarl when he rides by, and there's a wall of swords around him, for everyone believes he sent this scoundrel to slay Montferrat."

The officer kicked me in the side of the head. I flopped to my back. He glared.

"I ought to spit you here and now. That the King should pardon you is unforgivable."

"What?" the jailor screeched. "No execution after all?"

"The whims of royalty are strange," complained the officer, ramming his sword in place and hauling me upright without ceremony.

He thrust me through the door. My legs were weakened from hanging in chains. I fell again and cracked my head. The men laughed and booted me.

The hustled me along, two of them holding me between them. I could hardly believe I had been spared. I asked whether I'd heard all right.

"No mistake," returned the surly officer. "The King sent couriers instantly when he learned of Conrad's death, saying you were his subject and only he had authority to punish. His enemies had to bow to his will or provoke a public squabble. Then the King travelled from Acre to Damascus to counsel with the cursed Mussulman, and only now has he sailed here to deal with you. Pray God he deals ruthlessly."

They rushed me up a dismal stair. I asked to know what month it was.

"Just turned June. Close your traitor's mouth before I violate my orders and deliver a corpse."

They pulled me along passages and dark cloisters. Distantly I saw hot sunlight falling through an embrasure. They dragged me before the King in an upper apartment of Montferrat's house.

The loathing on Richard's face was terrible to behold. The officers retired. I tried to kneel and fell over.

"Give us no pretenses of humility, Blondel. Your smell is odious and your failure is equally so."

I supported myself on hands and knees. "My liege, I had no thought but to serve—"

"Serve!" He whirled and the purple cloak flew out. "God's holy knuckles, minstrel! Spare us further services of that kind. We dispatched you to cement relations with the overlord of Tyre, not to bring disgrace on us by murdering him."

"It was not my hand that struck!"

"We know only what Burgundy and public tongues say."

"Burgundy's own man slew Conrad!" I told what had transpired that evil night. Richard resumed his chair and poured mead for himself. He set the chalice aside after a single sip.

"Perhaps it did happen as you tell it. Even so, the harm's done."

"Put Burgundy on the rack. Make him admit his lie."

Sour humor curled Richard's mouth. "A precious long rack it would have to be. Reaching clear to France."

I gaped. "The Duke is gone?"

"Scarcely a fortnight after you were chained. Perhaps he's even now spreading among the good souls of Aquitaine the tale that their King is a revenge seeker!" He shook his head sadly. "Whether you struck the blow or not is of little importance. We are aware of Burgundy's talent for distorting the truth, especially when King Philip orders it. But that won't stop the clack of talk that says the English king ordered Conrad slain over the Jerusalem dispute. The story has added the last faggot to the bundle ready to burn at home. Last night news reached us of our brother the Prince. His excesses have become boundless. New taxes, new cruelties. Conferences with emissaries of Leopold and Philip are no longer hidden, but openly conducted."

"But how can a trumpery charge of murder serve their cause?"

"By making it easy for the folk of our French lands to bend the knee to new masters in good conscience. You be-

labor the obvious, minstrel," he added with heavy sarcasm. "You have destroyed us."

His anger quickened. One fist lifted as though to strike. "Destroyed us! Because of your mistakes, whether intentional or otherwise, we must turn from the one great cause of our lifetime and flee home. Have you a notion of the price it extracts from our hearts?"

Desperately I sought a means to convince him I'd acted in good faith. He gestured sharply to silence me. The ruby thumb ring flashed red fire.

"We sailed here to say you will not be slain. We owe you that much."

"My liege, I would rather be killed than—"

He cried out, "Be silent! Your witless mouth is an abomination! You may remain in our service if that is your choosing, but never again bring yourself into our sight."

"If I must be punished like this, then punish those who share my guilt!"

"Burgundy? We have already told you—"

"Not Burgundy. A woman who serves your household and your Queen."

He was furious. "This is not to be borne. This is not to be—"

"Lady Joanna Pembroke betrayed us both! I was guilty of telling her I would come to Tyre while she was still Burgundy's paramour. To the crime of loose speech I plead guilty, but to no other. It is the lady who passed Burgundy the news that allowed him—"

Richard's green buskin lifted and kicked me.

I fell over backwards. His shoulders and long arms quaked.

"Must you hide behind a woman's innocence? Blacken a woman's name to scour your own clean? Churl!"

So enraged was he that spittle from his lips struck me in the face. "You lackwit! You singer of cheap songs! You're a worse scoundrel than we had imagined. Begone!"

"No, my liege."

"Do you dare affront us with fresh insolence? *Begone!*"

"Either mark me blameless or kill me for what I've done, but don't leave me between—"

"Kill you? Would God that were possible."

He threw me a stare of such burning intensity that it wilted me like a blast of fire from the deepest bowel of hell. With a tortured cry he rushed from the chamber.

Three days passed, in sleep and wine, in the apartment one of Richard's servants led me to following that awful interview. My paltry possessions had been assembled, including the chest containing the cithara that was mockery of my whole life. Alternately sleeping and drinking myself sick. I arose on the fourth day with some of my strength returned, but none of my hope.

Why had he spared me? Time and again I wondered, concluding only that it was because we had grown up together. Because of our closeness then, he could not bring himself to destroy me now. But that was all. I was a traitor, if not intentionally, then accidentally. He had been gulled into thinking a fool could serve him.

Bitterly I remembered the high hopes with which I had entered this Holy Country. To find my life's destiny. Well, found it I had.

Churl. Lackwit. Singer of cheap songs.

My only remaining chance was to clear myself of guilt. It seemed an impossible task since I was forbidden to enter the King's presence and all in the house knew it. I attempted to gain an audience with Berengaria. The Queen and her women had landed at Tyre on the first stage of the sad journey homeward. They were quartered in a palace near the quay. But broadswords barred the gates.

Perhaps on the homeward voyage I could reach her. I was instructed to take a place on the red galley in the harbor, soon to sail. The same household emissary who brought me the orders—in contemptuous tones, for my fall from grace was public knowledge—stooped to tell me the truce was about to be concluded by Hubert Walter, who would remain behind in Damascus. Under its terms the Christians

would gain the ports of Acre and Jaffa, and be granted the right of unimpeded pilgrimage to the Holy City. Small compensation for a King who had counted on raising the Christian banner over the very streets Christ trod.

I trudged to the misty quay and was rowed out to the red galley. I remained below all day, rehearsing over and over the little speech with which I would approach the Queen.

At nightfall the galley raised anchor. Falling into a restless slumber, I wakened late the next morning. I helped myself to a joint of capon set out on a trestle at the great mast, then studied from a distance the company of women gathered beneath the deck canopy.

Bergenaria's lustrous locks, bound in a chaplet of pearls, shone in the warm sea light. She appeared gay enough. She had her usual group around her, but I missed Joanna's face. *Still abed?* I thought bitterly. *With some new lover?*

I'd long planned the insults with which I would greet her when we met. As to actually proving her duplicity in undoing the King, that would have to be done tactfully. I still loved her, like a man infected by poison. But I couldn't forgive her weakness in Burgundy's arms.

Suddenly I realized what was disturbing the back of my mind. Richard's red ensign was not flying from its accustomed place.

I ran to the helm. The captain, replacing the man who had died of fever at Acre, was a swart Venetian. He was watching the coast slip by.

"Your honor, did someone forget to fly the King's pennon?"

His expression showed he knew my bad reputation, but he was civil enough to start. "No, minstrel. It's not aboard for the simple reason that Lion Heart isn't either."

"I thought he meant to take this galley home to England."

"Home he goes, well enough, but—" the captain hesitated. "I see no harm in revealing the plot, since no one will be allowed off this vessel between here and Rome. Most everyone aboard knows, so I don't suppose a man of your—that is—"

"Speak out! Whatever the talk, I'm loyal to Richard."

His laugh became unpleasant. "The King seems to say otherwise. But since you must know, Richard heard in Tyre that his enemy Philip had many dromonds guarding the Pillars of Hercules and the Bay of Biscay. These ships were to prevent him from reaching England. There, if the messages are to be believed, Prince John already rides high. Richard is going by means of a poor and raffish galley he hired in Tyre. It put out hours ahead of us, and will land at Marseilles. From there the King plans to march overland and slip across to England."

"Madness! To journey through the country of his worst enemy—"

"But not as himself!" the mariner chuckled. "Lion Heart hasn't lost his wits, despite what the French pigs may think. He's travelling as Harold the Merchant, poorly clad, with few retainers, accompanied by his wife. In a month he'll be in London with Berengaria."

The contradiction addled me. "Explain if you can how he travels with his wife when she sits yonder under the awning."

"Oh, that's Berengaria right enough. The spouse of Harold the Merchant is a different person. The English queen is widely known to be dark and small boned. Therefore Richard chose another, more buxom and fair. Who would look twice beneath his cowl if he's with a yellow-haired woman?"

Dread knotted my belly. "Tell me the name of this false wife, master."

"Lady Joanna Pembroke. Don't gawk so! 'Twas all approved by Berengaria herself. The trip will be conducted with propriety. Didn't I say the King has a few servants with him? Be assured Berengaria had a hand in selecting them, not only for their loyalty but for their skill at observing anything that might—Minstrel! Where are you going?"

Treachery's reek smelled in the salt air. I plunged across the deck for the stairway to Berengaria. Two footmen holding staves blocked my path. The chatter under the awning died. Berengaria leaned over to watch me struggle with her guards.

"My lady, I must speak to you! Tell your lackeys—"

"He is not allowed in our presence," Berengaria said.

I ducked a clout in the head from one of the staves. "The King will be betrayed—"

"Strike him if he persists!" The staves crashed down.

I fell savagely on the footmen with curses and fists. They were burly, but agile for all that. One smashed me across the nose. The second jabbed his staff in my guts and knocked the wind out. Having heard no order for mercy from the Queen, they fell on me with professional vigor, and sent blow after blow against my head. Then they picked me up and carried me to the stinking section of the hold reserved for troublemakers.

I languished in leg irons two days, released at last by the captain himself, who first obtained my promise that I would not again try to approach the Royal Presence.

Sick and disheartened, I agreed. Somehow or other I must make Berengaria understand that she had harbored an enemy among her women, but aboard the cramped galley was not the place. In Rome, where she was to await a message from her husband saying all was well, I might have a better opportunity to scale a wall or bribe a guard.

The days and weeks we plowed through the Messina strait and rode overland to the Imperial City passed with unendurable slowness. Upon arrival in Rome the entire party was quartered in a lavish house belonging to a distant kinsman of the Queen's, some princeling of Navarre stationed at the Papal court. I was given a dark garret beneath the eaves and promptly forgotten. The summer became fall, the fall early winter. Chill rains beat on the Tiber and the seven hills. Several times I tried to gain Berengaria's presence. The roof and wall routes were useless, for all the windows were nailed over against the season. And her guards knew my face too well.

The house sank into a dismal period of waiting for the overdue message. It would inform us he had gone ashore safely at Marseilles.

The message never came.

One wet gray morning in late November the household was wakened by an uproar. Everyone gathered in the main hall to hear a frightened maid exclaim:

"I saw it in the public market not an hour ago. I swear by the Virgin I'm not mistaken. The velvet is blue colored, though stained. It bears the lions and the golden letter R. I'm sure it's the King's great baldric."

A steward said Richard had packed the baldric with him in a chest. Berengaria shrieked and fainted. I set off through the rain for the stall where it was displayed before a murmuring crowd.

Staring, I knew the terrible truth. Joanna had succeeded in betraying the King into the hands of his enemies. He was at best a prisoner. At worst dead.

I found a tavern and drank till I dropped. Only when I woke up did I think of what to do.

CHAPTER XVI

I RETURNED to the market stall to satisfy myself that the baldric was no clever counterfeit. The mob come to view it swelled hourly, for the blue velvet that had borne the weight of Richard's great sword was renowned throughout Christendom. Seeing the interest his display caused, the Syrian merchant who owned the booth announced that he would not sell the baldric. Was any other item so priceless in attracting crowds to his place of business?

I tried to question him. He was so excited by his sudden

fame I might as well have been conversing with one of the headless statues of Jupiter on the Capitoline. I returned to Berengaria's house and went to plead again with the armed men guarding her door.

"Let me in! It's a matter affecting the King's very life."

"Who's to say he has any life left?" was the surly reply.

"That's why I must speak with the Queen—so we can learn for certain. Only unlock the door and turn your backs. No blame will fall on you. I'll bear the whole brunt."

One of them laughed rudely. "Haven't you had enough already?"

The other considered. "How's the state of your purse, minstrel?"

"It will be fat when I return," I said eagerly. "Before nightfall, I promise."

They both sighed. "We should have known. We'll never see the fellow again."

I ran to my shabby room and tore through my belongings in hope of finding one object worth putting in pawn. My clothes were worthless. My Florentine dagger was a commonplace item, cheaply valued for all its killing keenness. I hadn't a single thing which to obtain—

Gleaming in a cobwebbed corner sat the polished chest containing the cithara.

As I lifted the precious wood from its velvet bed I thought of what it had cost poor Rolfe to make it for me. Not alone the hours of labors; but his life. To carry it to the moneylenders' quarter was like ransoming a part of my soul.

I haggled for the better part of an hour, until both chest and cithara fetched my price. The lender set the chest on a dusty shelf. He withheld the purse briefly.

"Young man, it's sometimes unwise to part with a thing you value highly. From your face I see you hesitate even now. I can't guarantee the cithara will be here if ever you decide—"

"Be quiet and hand me the money. Don't prolong a painful moment."

A thousand memories were left behind with that thing of wood and gut, but not the memory of how I had brought ill fortune to Richard. I would have smashed a dozen citharas and endured all the torment of each breaking to accomplish my plan.

The greedy guards accepted the money and promised to leave the door of the Queen's apartment ajar while she said Mass for her husband's soul at nightfall. Accordingly, I was crouched behind a tapestry when she returned from the household chapel. She dismissed her ladies-in-waiting, saying she was weary and wished to be alone.

I stepped slowly from concealment so as not to startle her.

"Good Queen, don't cry out—"

"Guards! Guard. Come with your swords!"

"In God's name, my lady! I beg you listen to me!"

So ferociously did I exclaim that she was stayed an instant. She must have seen the pain my face bore. She walked quickly into the corridor where the two guards were fumbling about, afraid they were to be chastised and therefore loath to enter promptly. Berengaria told them to disregard her command but remain ready to break in at a moment's notice.

"Rise, minstrel. You offend us sorely by your presence here."

"My lady, I'll risk the punishment if you'll just hear me out. I carry an awful guilt as a result of Conrad's death. I would not have harmed the king willingly or intentionally, and if my low ways brought it to pass, I must make amends."

She was torn between her dislike of me, inherited from the King, and her natural gentleness. While she hesitated I pressed on:

"You will not care to hear what I have to say, my lady. You'll revile me for it as the King did. But I'll stake my life on the truth of what I'm about to tell you."

Rapidly I poured out my suspicions of Lady Joanna. Her gaze grew cold when I accused her handmaiden of treachery. Then a little of the coldness drained away as I streng-

thened my accusation with the evidence of circumstances: Hugh of Burgundy's sudden journey from Acre, after I had seen him just prior to meeting Joanna; the passage of the swift ship in the night; Hugh's presence at Conrad's court when I arrived.

"If the King's enemies sought a way to blacken his name, the better to reduce his power, no finer opportunity could have presented itself than murdering a man the King openly disliked but finally bowed to."

"That much is true enough," the Queen mused. "All Europe's in a ferment. There is talk of war in France and England in the spring. A tale of the King's thirst for revenge, however false, will hardly bring any new followers flocking to his standard."

A tear ran down her cheek but her hands remained rigid on her chair arm as she added: "If he still lives at all."

"That's what I propose to find out, my lady. I think he may be—"

"Wait. Don't pass so lightly over your accusation of Lady Joanna."

"It's an accusation hard to make. I was her lover. I thought she loved me in return."

"And your feelings now?"

"I tell myself I'd kill her. I think when it came to doing so, I would be helpless. I love her still."

"Even suspecting she may have betrayed our husband?"

"Even then. I acknowledge my weakness. But I can't change it."

That simple exchange tipped the balance, and moved her from polite hostility to willingness, if not to be swayed, at least to listen with sympathy.

"Joanna was deeply in love with Burgundy, my lady. That's a public fact. I thought our alliance changed her feelings but evidently it did not."

"There is agony on your face, Blondel. We wonder whether you could feign it."

"That," I said slowly, "only the Queen's wisdom can decide."

A tired smile lifted her delicate mouth. "Always the quick tongue. Yet I do find myself a little persuaded. Perhaps it's only because I grieve for Richard and harbor some hope that he be alive."

I hope. She had dropped the royal plural and was continuing with less strain! "About your allegations I can't comment, except to say Lady Joanna herself suggested the King would be safer travelling with a wife who in no way resembled me."

"All the more reason to suspect a trap. Probably Burgundy himself put her up to it."

"What's the use of debating the matter if the blue baldric was stripped from a corpse?"

"That possibility I won't accept until I see his body with my own eyes. Either he has been slain outright or imprisoned. He wouldn't have parted willingly with the baldric in either case. But it may be that his enemies will simply hold him until John can seize England and Philip and Burgundy his French lands. That would serve the purpose as well as killing him, and yet leave them relatively guiltless."

"If he is truly hidden away—"

"I'll travel and find him! Walk from town to town, castle to castle. If he's alive we'll spread the word. Then his enemies will have to ransom him. If I could locate him, the combined voices of you and his mother Elinor could stir the Pope himself. He might intercede. Please, my lady. Give me leave to go. More important, give me any scrap of news you may possess that I do not."

"Would you search all Europe, minstrel?"

"I would and I will, until I'm certain."

"Winter's coming on. It promises to be long and cold. The open road is hard."

"No harder than the guilt I bear for harming the King's cause."

She pressed a palm over her eyes. "Against all sense and reason I'm moved to accept your offer. I'll give you my blessing and what little help I can."

"Thank you, my lady."

"To the extent that I can make myself heard in the presence of the Holy See, I will do so. I will also communicate with Elinor. She wields more influence than I with the Pope. But I believe in my heart," she finished sadly, "that you'll find only a grave at the end of your search."

"Have you had any communication from the King since Tyre?"

She thought on it. "One brief letter, delivered by a courier when our galley was passing through the Messina strait. The letter said the party of Harold the Merchant had landed at the isle of Corfu. The Virgin protect him if one of my own women has—Blondel, your words have weighed down my spirits."

"But you have lifted mine; my lady."

"A moment more. Tell me how you managed to enter here."

"I can't. I swore I wouldn't."

"No harm will come to anyone who helped you. I promise."

My cheeks were hot with shame as I told briefly of my visit to the lender's shop to gain a purse, and of the transfer of the funds into hands of certain influential persons I didn't name. As if hunting a way to lighten her own gloom, Berengaria laughed gently.

"Influential persons whose knees knock together outside our door this moment? We'll keep our word. They won't be punished. Go swiftly now, and send us news here when news is to be had."

Thanking her again, I promised I would do so and quickly retired.

At dawn next day I was setting out to the market when a servant in house livery called, "Master Blondell Hold up. This dropped from your belt a moment ago."

He showed me a purse.

"That's not mine."

"Don't quarrel with me," he said testily. "If you insist I'll keep it, but it's certainly a funny attitude for a minstrel

bereft of his cithara, not to mention the funds to reclaim it."

I seized the purse. "Thank the owner of the sharp eyes that saw me lose my most precious possession."

"Thanks shall be given," he replied with a knowing smile, and went away.

I ran through blowing sleet to the lender's shop. The shelf was empty.

"What's this?" the lender said slyly. "A sentimental visit?"

"Where's my cithara, bloodsucker? I'll take the price out of your hide if it's gone."

"What a hot tongue! Stand at ease. I have it in my quarters in back. I was amusing myself with it. Customers are few, now that deep winter is approaching.

Momentarily he returned with the chest. I paid him the borrowed sum plus his interest fees and departed quickly. "Can't you stay a while, master?" he asked. "I'd like to hear you demonstrate your skill. Where are you bound so hastily?"

"To find a king."

CHAPTER XVII

When I visited the Syrian merchant again, he was willing to discuss the baldric, especially after I paid for his time with coins from Berengaria's purse.

"Where did it come from, master? If I possessed that secret, I'd fly there myself to fetch anything else I could find, because never has my booth been so overflowing with

customers. The baldric was sold to me at the exorbitant price of a thousand florins by a rascally merchant from the northern provinces. He received it second or third hand. At an increase in price every time, I might add. I asked no questions. He seemed as much in the dark about its origins as I am now."

I thanked him and set out through the gates of the Imperial City along the road to the western port of Ostia.

The shorter road into Europe, due overland northward, was useless because of the baldric's murky history. I planned to take ship at Ostia for Corfu. This island lies southeast of the strait of Otranto, hard by the Ionian coast. Reputed to be a den of pirates and a haven for the lawless of Europe, Corfu still represented the last place the King had arrived safely. I failed to reckon with the wretched squalor of the Ostia docks, or the bands of footpads roaming them after nightfall.

The very evening I arrived, I was set on by a dozen of the rogues. I awoke in an alley with an aching skull. They had spared the cithara, doubtless because the chest could be too easily identified. But they hadn't spared my purse.

I kept a fool's grin on my lips and plied my trade in the harbor inns, by day and night, singing bawdy songs for seamen and their whores. I was continually conscious of the wail of the wind outside. Gusts of snow heralded the closing of the sea lanes when winter set in in earnest. Time was my enemy. The way to Corfu would be blocked in scarcely a month.

I hardly slept in my frantic effort to refurbish my purse. I would have written the Queen in Rome except for the fact that by the time I had money to buy writing materials and the services of a public scrivener, I also had money for sea passage on a dark, stinking commercial dromond.

It was a rough trip. The sailors regaled me with stories of the brutalities of the sea brigands of Corfu. I sat many hours with the dromond's captain, entertaining him with songs and tales of my various journeys. In return he promised to make inquiries among certain of his contacts at Corfu

regarding the fate of an Englishman called Harold the Merchant.

On the first cheerless morning of the New Year 1193, I saw looming cliffs and the black smudge of the Ionian headlands beyond. The dromond dropped anchor in Corfu harbor. Along the quay the only structures to be seen were shipping factories, brothels and waterfront dives. The last two far outnumbered the first.

I spent a while wandering up and down avoiding as best I could the attentions of the ruffians who seemed to be everywhere. At dusk I went to meet the captain at a noxious inn swarming with the same waterfront riffraff. The inn was known, appropriately enough, as *The Fallen Angel.*

Over a pint of bitter wine the seafarer said, "The merchant has been here and gone."

My stomach went cold. "Captain Rodolfo, did harm befall him?"

"Well, he had his skin in one piece, if my friends tell the truth. So did his wife and his servants. That's not to say the condition was permanent. Did you notice a long black galley in the harbor as we docked? It belongs to a man named Toscar. He's a pirate. The cruellest on the Ionian coast."

"Was Li—Harold the Merchant caught by this pirate?"

"Caught? No, but the result's the same. He and his party went aboard Toscar's black bird voluntarily. The pirates vanished up the Adriatic the best part of a month ago."

"What happened to Harold's own vessel?"

"Sunk in the storms that are so frequent in these parts," was the reply.

I set another pint of wine before him. His face was distressed behind the drifting hearth smoke.

"My thanks for your help, Captain Rodolfo. Did your informant perchance know where Toscar took the merchant?"

"No doubt to his grave. Who is this Harold? Your master?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Well, loyalty is loyalty, but don't carry it too far. Steer side of Toscar's cut-throats."

"Alas," I said heavily, "I haven't any choice. If he knows something, I must see him."

"That'll be a nice undertaking. His cronies, including a lieutenant named Emilio who once sailed with me, come here often. But Toscar himself has too many enemies. He never leaves his ship. The only way you'll enter his presence is to become one of his victims."

Rapidly he drained his wine. "Master Blondel, heed my words. You're inviting disaster, trafficking with such brutes."

"A man who has died once can't do it again, Captain Rodolfo."

He blinked at the remark but didn't press me about it, muttering that he must return to his vessel. He departed into a darkness punctuated by the screams of some hapless wretch being assaulted by bandits. I thought about how I could wangle an introduction to Toscar.

A means suggested itself in the person of an Ionian tax gatherer. He was very fat and had apparently wandered into *The Fallen Angel* without knowing the nature of the den. He was now shovelling down his meal as rapidly as possible so that he might leave. I called for more wine, downed the mug, then made my way unsteadily toward the door. I passed the tax gatherer's table and stumbled against him.

"Your pardon, noble sir. The wine has befuddled me."

"No harm done, no harm done." Terrified, he went on stuffing his jaws with meat.

I slipped outside, tossed his fat purse high and caught it. From my sleeve I drew the Florentine dagger with which I'd cut the strings.

A cry of alarm went up inside. I ran down the street.

I located another inn and sat in a shadowy corner, whiling away an hour until I was sure the tax gatherer had abandoned any idea of pursuit.

Among other effects left from time to time by inebriated seamen, the landlord of the inn had a cheap goatskin purse which more properly fitted a man of my station. We bargained. Merely because I was a stranger and showed interest, he demanded a heavy price for the trifle. As a result I had

only half the tax gatherer's wealth to transfer to the new pouch. I filled the bottom with stones from the street, the top with the remaining coins, and took myself back to *The Fallen Angel.* A dreadful racket filled the place. The cause of it was soon apparent—four or five men with pierced ears and dirty seafaring clothes. The worst of the lot, powerful and bearded, had a leather cheek raw with a barely healed scar. He was identified by a trembling Greek whore as Emilio, Toscar's second.

The pirates sang songs in a dialect I didn't understand. They practiced with their throwing knives, scarring the landlord's wall. I sought a place near the fire, ordered wine, consumed it and feigned sleep.

Soon I heard whispers. I stirred on the bench, allowing my purse to jingle. Presently I pretended to wake and tottered outside.

My back ran with cold sweat as I huddled behind *The Fallen Angel's* door. I didn't have to wait long.

Light spilled into the black street. Emilio lurched out, followed by his mates.

He looked both ways along the darkened dock. "Where's our little pigeon? Where did he run with his little hoard? Nót far, I'll warrant. Now where can he—"

I threw my arm around his neck from behind and let him feel iron against his throat.

"Here's the little pigeon, pirate. He has fangs."

"Seize him!" Emilio cried to his stupefied friends.

"Try it and I'll give him a second mouth," I said, digging in the knife.

Emilio tried to drag out the knife he kept in his wide leather belt. I prevented that by slashing the back of his wrist. He screamed and lost a lot of his fight.

"Close that door," I said. "And keep that pack of curious fools inside. I'm not after your lieutenant's life but I'll take it unless he carries me to Toscar. I have business with him."

I bent Emilio's head back. He choked out, "Whoever you are, master, we bow to your will. Ah, God damn—don't

throttle me so viciously. Mates, walk ahead of us to the quay."

"No." I held him back. "Only one other goes, for rowing. The rest remain. And if I hear another set of oars lapping anywhere, the job of lieutenant on your ship will be open."

Emilio cursed and gave in. I sat in the stern thwarts of their little boat. Emilio, worried about his knife-wrist, occupied himself bandaging it with a length of cloth torn from his tunic. The short trip was over before I knew it.

I pushed Emilio up the ladder, making a show of swaggering before the members of the pirate crew who slipped across the darkened deck, astounded by the sight of Emilio a prisoner. Long shadows fell before them, cast by a lonesome light high in the shrouds. The water lapped softly. If Toscar proved an unfriendly host, I had little hope of getting off this black craft alive.

Emilio led me down a sour passage, lightless except for an oil wick's gleam through a door that stood ajar at the end Toscar rose from his red velvet chair.

He was a little gnarled peacock of a man in dark garments. A costly gold chain and cross of Malta hung on his shrivelled chest. His face was one of the most ghastly I have ever seen.

It was like a waxen face, half of which has melted and hardened again, in distortion. His entire right cheek was puckered from an old sword cut. The mouth was pulled upward, the eyelid down, giving him a perpetual leer. Greasy strings of gray hair framed his tiny eyes, and what few teeth he owned were rotted brown stumps.

Toscar sidled up to his lieutenant and dealt him three stinging blows in the face.

"What sort of sops serve me, Emilio? To come cringing back into Toscar's presence the captive of a stranger!"

"The whoreson attacked me when I wasn't looking," Emilio complained.

"Who are you, messire?" Toscar asked me. "Some agent of my enemies?"

"A minstrel by name of Blondel de Nesle."

"French?"

"From Aquitaine. But I owe allegiance to Richard of England."

"Ah!"

He resumed his seat. His feet were clad in slippers adorned with garnets, and did not touch the floor. He plucked at a joint of fowl lying on a silver platter and laughed, or more properly cackled.

"What tune would you sing if I ordered my men to fall upon you this minute? Can't you hear them rustling yonder in the dark?"

I did, but Toscar was more dangerous than his witless thugs. A man his size had to be ruthless to survive as a pirate.

"The tune, captain, will be composed of Emilio's shrieks and the bubble of his blood. Call for help and see."

Emilio rolled his eyes and sputtered wrathfully. Toscar helped himself to wine and remarked, "It may come to pass that I'll have you killed and quartered. If so, I'll regret it. You have courage. I could use a man like you, not only to bring some music to this dismal ship, but to replace certain nameless members of my crew who talk boldly but don't act that way."

Emilio paled. I said, "Captain, I seek a certain Englishman, Harold the Merchant."

Toscar shrugged. "The name means nothing."

To assist his memory I pressed the Florentine knife further into Emilio's throat, until he squawked. Toscar cackled again.

"Gig him all you please. I still know nothing. Why do you want him?"

"I'm in his service. I fear he's fallen into the hands of his foes. I know you bore him north into the Adriatic on this very ship."

"Misinformation. I trust you didn't pay for it." Toscar threw a capon joint over his shoulder and attacked another.

"Captain, what if I told you the real name of the man I seek is Richard. Richard Lion-Heart."

Toscar's eyelid dropped grotesquely, questioning. "How do you know?"

"Because I am his minstrel, and went with him to the Holy Land."

"What proofs of that can you offer?"

Risking everything in a play for the highest stakes, I turned Emilio loose and tore the fowl joint from the astonished pirate chief's hand. "His enemies have taken him prisoner! His baldric of blue velvet, which you may have seen—" Toscar's crooked eyebrow jerked and betrayed him. "—is for sale in Rome's public market." I thrust the hilt of my dagger toward him.

"Take it. As testimony to my good intent."

Toscar's tiny eyes were unreadable for what seemed an endless moment.

"Emilio, haul your unclean hide out of here. I wish to converse with this man in private."

In a fit of temper, the wounded pirate stormed from the cabin, and slammed the door. Toscar indicated a chair. I took it, with much relief.

"If the man whom we'll refer to as Harold the Merchant has indeed fallen into evil hands, it's no wonder," Toscar commented. "When I sailed north with him, his pretty wife and his servants, he wished to be put ashore at Ragusa. The landing was impossible. The town swarmed with knights in the service of one or another of those European Dukes whose name I don't recall."

"Leopold of Austria?"

"That may have been it. Pour yourself some wine, master Blondel. I'm convinced of your honesty. Not so much because of your words. They're easily counterfeited. But you attacked Emilio. Not one man in a hundred of the sodden and cowering Corfu folk would have dared that."

"The townspeople say Harold boarded your ship of his own free will."

Another rasping chuckle from his deformed lips. "And they doubtless prophecied a grim end for him. Well, Toscar isn't as black as he's painted, though he's not so white as

an angel, either. I admired your master the moment I set eyes upon him. It was down the shore from this same harbor. Bravery is a commodity I put great faith in, having been forced all my life to live without it and depend on guile."

"What was Harold's condition when you met him?"

"Wet. We sank his Tyrian galley as it came in to make anchorage. Probably your master would have died like any other man I chose to plunder, except for the fact that he stood on deck as his vessel foundered, brandishing a sword and shouting for me to come do battle. Naturally I refused. I spoke through a trumpet and joked with him. I said I wouldn't soil my hands on a merchant. He told me he was Richard and ordered his servants to bring out the baldric you mentioned as witness. I rowed over. While I was examining it, Emilio lost his head and fell on him. This Harold fought. One man against two dozen. I couldn't allow such a worthy foe to perish, particularly if what he said was the truth. We became friends while he was my prisoner," concluded the pirate, rather warmly.

"Richard persuaded you to carry him north?"

"Aye. He would have paid all the money he had, but I considered it an honor to serve him for only half the price." Once more Toscar puffed up sententiously.

"Originally he meant to sail for Marseilles. Do you know why he changed plans?"

"No. He said only that he had to journey in secret."

"Where did you leave him?"

"On a strip of beach, far north. Near a fishing village on the Venetian coast."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Nothing I'm afraid."

Despite his strange ways, and stranger appearance, I liked the man. "Let me thank you, Captain. If you'll show me on a chart the location of that beach, I'll beg your pardon for humiliating your lieutenant and return to shore."

"You intend to buy passage to Venice or thereabouts?"

"Yes."

"Would you accept passage on this ship? Consider it a favor. I'm bound outward again in a few days in any case. Pickings will be lean enough wherever we go this time of year. It might as well be the Adriatic."

I wanted to be sure he wasn't drawing me into a clever trap. But I could detect no sign of guile under those dropped and twitching eyelids. By way of persuasion he added:

"Why, I might even find it in my heart—which landsman say is nonexistent—to pay you a modest fee if you'll pluck out a melody or two. Even looters like to sing when they drink."

I laughed and said, "The bargain's struck, Captain."

"Good, good. Help yourself to meat while I send one of my uglies ashore to fetch your belongings. You'll have to tell me more of your master's difficulties." He cocked an eye. "I should have guessed at once that you served him. In a certain light your faces are similar."

Wolfing a capon leg, I paid scant attention to his remark. Emilio entered. Under Toscar's prodding, he gruffly accepted my apology for having slashed him.

I longed to raise anchor that night, but Toscar was granting me a boon and I had to accept it on its own terms. I felt encouraged. The King had at least gained to the Venetian coast in good health. It was no comfort to learn that Joanna had been at his side all the time, though.

So I sailed northward with the pirates, onto the rough green Adriatic. The booty, as Toscar had glumly predicted, was so lean as to be nonexistent. I spent much time in his cabin performing most every song I'd ever learned, and I came to respect and like him even more. In his twisted way he was a learned man. Even Emilio took wine with us, and became a grudging friend.

Toscar and his lieutenant personally accompanied me to that desolate shore not far from Venice, one gray late January morning.

"Though I carry little weight with him," Toscar said, plucking his cloak tight to his spindly body, "God speed your

search, Blondel." Behind him the galley bobbed on a shoppy sea. Gale clouds raced. The air stung with sharp mist.

"May you sail long and profitably, Captain Toscar."

The wind was cold as I toiled up the hillside. I watched the galley sail away south, then turned my steps toward Venice and the whole of Europe locked in deep winter.

CHAPTER XVIII

At Venice every innkeeper knew the story of the English merchant who had passed through a few months earlier. According to them, he had set out for the northern borders from Chioggia. Following the coast south, I discovered that the Venetians had been wrong. In truth, the Chioggians said, he had departed for the Alps with a trading company from a Venetian commercial house, whose name no one knew.

There were other stories abroad in Chioggia as well. That the merchant had quarrelled with knights owing fealty to Count Mainard of Gorizia. That he had fled for Austria in peril of his life. Wearily I set out that direction.

I worked my way northeast, through Krimml and Mittersill, coming at last into the domain of Sturmwulf. It lay beyond ancient Salzburg, hard by the Traun Sea. No particular news of the King had led me there. Beyond Chioggia the whole continent might have been a blank tablet.

Yet if Duke Leopold's hand was certain, Sturmwulf's might be also. The three castles belonging to the Baron

were high, dark places looming against gray skies. At each I received a curt reception as I carried out my scheme for learning whether Richard might be inside.

I would linger a day at a tavern in the vicinity of a castle until word circulated of my coming. Then I would take myself to the castle itself, and scrape and joke and play tunes in the inner bailey, hoping the seneschal would hear and invite me inside to perform at the evening meal.

By the large the Teutons are not a musical people. Or at least they have no ear for light and fanciful stuff, preferring instead heavy chants of armor and war. Still, wherever I went, I sang out clear and loud, even in the teeth of driving blizzards, the song that began *Two winters I am bound.*

It was the last Richard and I had sung together. If he heard it from some barred tower, he would know his cause was not forgotten and contrive to get word to me.

At one of Sturmwulf's castles a foolish stable-boy chattered that his lord had departed, most mysteriously in the dead of night, for a castle he had been ceded beyond the Rhine near the French border. The winter wind blew on, freezing my bones and deadening my heart as I trudged toward this place. I was a month and better in the journeying, for it was situated past Augsburg in rough, snow country. Along the way I stopped at night to sing for scraps and a cup of the dregs and a pallet that was usually near the stinking castle *garderobe.* Once or twice a castle functionary questioned my loyalties. I replied that I had been born in English Aquitaine but rejoiced at the prospect of seeing all France restored to the rule of Philip. A satisfactory response. I was never harmed.

Roadside taverns buzzed with talk of Prince John's English venture: This Saxon whoreson or that had been imprisoned. A French army was massing on the Norman borders to decimate Richard's lands when winter broke. The highways swarmed with brigands as well as homely serfs journeying west to enlist. In such a troubled time I reached Sturmwulf's dark keep, Triffels Castle.

Triffels didn't present to the world the same severe face

as his Austrian holdings. Standing, as it did, not far from the French frontier, its battlements were graceful, reminiscent of Aquitaine. A chapel spire reached up against a panorama of dark hillsides where tall pines grew. The roofs around the bailey were blue slate. Clouds of steam floated across the muddy yard from the bathhouse. The jousting ground and the deserted lists were dimly visible at the foot of a hill outside the portcullises.

Cooks and cellarers and lackeys bustled in all directions. There were quite a few lords and ladies gathered here, judging from the activity. It was raining, a warm rain, for it was almost Holy Week, 1193.

The rain chilled me for all its promise of a green time soon to come. I unfastened the wooden chest in the bailey and cradled my cithara beneath my cloak. With numbed fingers, I tried to stir life out of the strings. I had visited a hundred castles or more, and I was beginning to believe the King was dead.

A pretty maid of the bedchamber bound on some errand paused to watch my preparations. I threw her a smile.

"Who is the lord of this place, pretty one?" I asked.

"Why, messire, it's Friedrich, Baron Sturmwulf."

"He's far from his homeland, isn't he?"

"Far from home but near to the war they say is coming," she replied with an unhappy smile.

Carefully I inquired, "There seem to be many noble guests."

"Mostly the Baron's knights. They have a great love of jousting. The Baron's been in terrible temper waiting for the sun to come and dry the lists. As soon as it does, they'll be at it, to prepare. The Baron has promised to spend Michaelmas in Aquitaine."

I nearly dropped the cithara in the mud. "The war will be over by September?"

The girl shrugged. "Why not? They say Richard of England was slain by brigands in Italy."

A weight like a stone hung inside me. "This is known for a fact?"

"How can anything be known for a fact when every passing priest and soldier has a new account?" she replied pettishly. "Baron Sturmwulf says it is, however, and laughs loudly, so it must be true, messire, I don't intend to get soaked for nothing. I want to hear a song. We've had no minstrels at Triffels all winter."

"Yea, a song, a song!" cried some other servants who had gathered.

"Very well. Here's a sad lament from my homeland, suitable for such a dark day."

With a wearied hand and a cheerless voice I began to play and sing.

Two winters I am bound.
In love's fair fetters found.
Her eyes a donjon make for me
While she trips gayly round.

Rain beat in muddy pools. The packtrain's armor clanked from the stable. If Sturmwulf, privy to Leopold's confidences, reported Richard dead in Italy, my journey was over.

I was barely able to begin the next line: *Two summers I am chained—*

In love's soft bonds constrained—

My fingers whitened on the cithara.

Her arms a bailey build for me—

Abruptly the distant baritone voice went silent.

The servants looked about, puzzled. One pointed up. High in the rain rose a round tower. The man who had pointed whispered to a companion. I seized him.

"Who sang out in reply to me? Who lodges in that tower?"

"No one."

"A nobleman with a foreign face, perhaps?"

"No one of any importance," corrected the serving girl. "Only half a dozen of the Baron's knights. And one room has been given to a merchant whom the Baron helped when he fell ill upon the highroad. The merchant's wife eats in

the great hall. The man is so feverish he can't. Why you should fret over—"

"When did this merchant arrive?" I hardly dared to hope. *"Tell me!"*

"What nonsense!" The maid stamped her foot. "Some time after the Baron came here from Castle Kaummen at Traun See. Word passed that an ailing guest was present and no one thought any more about it. Do you intend to finish your song or don't you?"

A portly man in dark velvet appeared at the edge of the crowd, thrusting this way and that.

"Enough of your lazy ways! Back to work!"

Muttering, the servants departed. The portly man approached. I tried to keep my gaze away from that rain-shrouded tower, tried to recall each inflection of the baritone voice drifting down. Unmistakable—or was it?

The portly man frowned. "I am the Baron's seneschal, come to say we don't welcome strangers at Triffels."

I spoke quickly, "Master, only give me a night's lodging. I'll sing for my keep."

"If your performance a moment ago was an indication of your talent, you don't know more than half a song," he grunted. "Begone!"

"In this rain? It's cruel to turn a man out." I had to speak carefully. Should he guess how desperately I wanted to enter his castle, I'd be finished. I forced a wheedling smile on my face. "Let me bring pleasure to your master of the castle and you can claim the credit, and any money as well."

He was a shrewd fellow, and not really unkind. He deliberated only a moment.

"Very well. Come warm yourself in the kitchen. You can take your place in the minstrel gallery tonight. I'll admit it's been empty a long time."

He grew even more accommodating as we trudged across the bailey. "Understand, it's not my nature to turn a minstrel out, but it is my responsibility to judge the Baron's humors. He has no thought for anything except staging a tournament."

I followed him inside to the blazing hearth. "Your master

must be a man of good heart. One of the servants said he was caring for a sick merchant."

"Sick merchant?" The seneschal's eyes hardened. "They have idle tongues. No such person is at Triffels. You'll do well to ask no more questions. Stay by this fire until you're summoned."

He disappeared behind two servants lugging in a pole from which dangled a string of fat hens. The cooks set about roasting the hens on spits, peppering them liberally. I warmed my hands and sought a chance to dart away and venture into that high tower.

No such opportunity presented itself all day. The kitchen hummed and as an outlander I was curiously, and closely watched. But if Richard were the prisoner, I would know when I saw his wife.

The dancing hearth fire burned up scarlet as my sudden hate of her. Then another thought troubled me. What if I were brought directly into Sturmwulf's presence? It must not happen. If Richard was alive, my task was to escape to Aquitaine and Elinor, so she could raise a furor with Pope Celestine III. Sturmwulf had heard me speak several times but never, that I could recall, had he heard me sing. If I could perform behind a gallery wall, all would be well.

Nightfall.

The seneschal sent a squire to conduct me up a winding stone stair. It led to a balcony mercifully closed on all three sides by a stone wall pierced with round openings. The squire left. I peered down to the hall.

A cold draft blew through the lofty place, rustling the banners and tapestries. Fresh rushes on the floor concealed dirty ones from previous meals. The stink of that artificial carpet under which old bones rotted away was appalling. My belly tightened. There was the master of Triffels.

Sturmwulf was thoroughly drunk. He sat in a chair on a dais. Before him on a trestle table were silver ewers and candlesticks, standing cups and the remains of a meal of hens and trout. Many knights sat near him, with their ladies too, chattering noisily.

At tables below the salt the household staff wolfed the leftovers. Most of the hundred or so present were, like Sturmwulf, drunk and boisterous.

I raised the cithara to sing, then loosened the Florentine dagger, if only to be prepared. Of Joanna there was no sign.

I launched into the bawdiest canzo I knew. Sturmwulf swilled another cup of wine, most of which dribbled down his dark gambeson.

The seneschal genuflected at his shoulder, trying to call attention to the fact that a minstrel was performing. Sturmwulf nodded to acknowledge the information, then fell into another round of drinking with his knights. Thankful for the scant attention paid me, I commenced another song.

My confidence grew. Surely Joanna would appear. Then I could steal away. I did not count on her making such a sudden startling entrance.

The entrance staircase was raised slightly above the hall's floor. Even the most careless eye was drawn at once to the figure standing there.

Joanna was haggard. Her eyes were circled with dark shadows and puffy from sleep. Her samite gown was shabby from too long a wearing. Many of the ladies tittered.

Joanna moved slowly toward the place left open for her beside Sturmwulf. The Baron's face left no doubt about why he was treating his prisoner so courteously. Harsh lust lit his eyes as he said, "We have wished for your presence tonight, my lady."

"I slept overlong, Baron."

She seated herself and stared at the remains of the meal. Sturmwulf leaned across to stroke her shoulder.

"Perhaps your spirits will lighten with a song." He raised his face toward the gallery. "Warble for our guest, minstrel."

My hands turned cold. I had forgotten she knew my voice.

"What's wrong with the simpleton?"

Sturmwulf leaped to his feet, upsetting a platter that dripped grease on the rushes. His hand reached the hilt of his broadsword.

"You, bird, in your stone tree! A song and promptly."

Perhaps Joanna was too distraught to recognize my singing. It was my one hope. I began an alba.

Her gray eyes lifted to the stone barrier between us. The hall was silent. Sturmwulf peered at her.

"My lady, why do you grow pale?"

"There is no reason, Baron."

"Don't be deceived, Sturmwulf," a knight laughed. "From her expression, the merchant's wife has heard your songbird before."

Sturmwulf blinked. "Is this so, my lady?"

Standing unsteadily, he had no real suspicions yet. He was chiefly interested in forcing Joanna to answer his every question. But her desperate glances at the gallery would give the game away.

Sturmwulf took her silence for stubbornness. He hauled her up, tearing her gown in the process. He threw her to the floor. She lay staring at him, frightened. Her samite bodice had come undone when he seized her. White breasts shone in the torch glare.

The Baron stepped lightly on her belly. He put the point of his sword to her throat. All the knights stood up to see.

"Come, dear one. Remember your position in my household. When I ask a question, I expect a polite reply. Who is the fellow up there? A lover? Very well, if you won't speak, we'll fetch him down. Perhaps the sight of—"

Joanna twisted from under the sword and screamed, *"Blondel, run!"*

Pandemonium erupted. I held the cithara with one hand, ripped out the Florentine dagger with the other. I raced from the gallery while Joanna's hysterical screams rang below. Sturmwulf shouted orders to his men.

Up the stairwell came torchlight, thrust ahead of the armed retainers. I doubled back. The stair ended at a blank wall just beyond the gallery entrance.

Long staffs and hands reached out for me. I stabbed with the dagger. Blood gushed from the throat of the first man. Cries went up from the rest. They rushed me in a body.

A staff smashed the side of my head. Another rammed

into my neck. I fell on my knees, retching. The Florentine dagger flew away. Still clutching the cithara, I was dragged down to the great hall to Sturmwulf.

I hung fighting and kicking between two of the burly fellows. They pushed me to my knees. Sturmwulf approached, a towering colossus because of my position.

His yellow locks were disheveled, his eyes hard as blue stones from a brook. He prodded my chin with his toe.

"Never did I expect so perfect a reunion, minstrel. I had forgotten you, as a man forgets a louse on his body that hops away before it can be slapped to death. And here you have hopped back. You needn't tell me why."

His face lighted with a joke only we understood. His knights and ladies, were curious, but to them the man in the tower was still a merchant. I could at least rectify that.

"A moment later, Baron, and I'd have sung a new song for your guests. One telling of treachery, of a King prisoned in—"

His boot struck where I least expected, down upon my hand and the cithara, smashing both.

I saw a wild vision of dead Rolfe and lost my senses, falling on his legs like an animal, to drag him down and kill him. His knights overturned the trestles, leaping to his defense. A sword flew high, down. The flat of it against my head stopped my attack.

I was held up in front of him again.

"We've an apartment for you too, minstrel. A solid one of stone, full of many interesting mechanical devices. You'll spend a while there. Dying very slowly."

Again Joanna's tormented scream, as the knights and footmen closed around and beat me senseless, laughing over the sport of it.

CHAPTER XIX

In the arts of torture, Sturmwulf's donjon keepers were accomplished masters.

For them no simple devices like the rack, the thumbscrew or the boot, although their cavern far underground was equipped with these instruments. No iron chains for hanging by the thumbs while the skin roasted over a fiery pit, although charred bones testified that Sturmwulf's enemies had enjoyed this end many times in the past. Even the fiendish knotted rope, used once on a Muslim prince whose name I couldn't recall in my delirium, was too unsophisticated. I became the honored inmate of a great wooden chest, its sides and top hypocritically painted with religious scenes in gilt and pastels. The *chambre a crucit.*

Barely large enough to hold a man when empty, half the chest was filled with sharp stones. The guardians of Sturmwulf's donjon, witless creatures in leather breeches whose naked chests ran with sweat, fought me into the box, then closed the lid and sat upon it.

At first they kept me in only a moment, for just a taste of the spiky agony of rocks bruising a naked backside. Later it was more than a moment. It was ten. Then half an hour.

I lost track of time, screamed, wished my back would break. Soon I was unable to bear the slightest touch on my flayed spine and butt and legs. I dared not move in the chest. The slightest tremor of flesh brought fresh torment.

I could breathe well enough. There were air holes. The purpose of the box was not suffocation but slow reduction of a man to a red jelly as the level of the rocks was increased.

During the intervals when the keepers rested, I was allowed to lie on the slimed floor sucking on a wine-soaked

rag. At one such time the donjon door opened with a clank.

"Enjoying my hospitality, songbird?" Sturmwulf asked.

"Bastard! Whoreson! Raper of women—"

One of the keepers lashed me across the mouth with a bundle of hide strips.

Sturmwulf asked the keepers. "Has he made music?"

"A few times. Not so much as most. He has a strong will."

He ran a gauntlet through the stones of the open *chambre*, all black with blood. "Add more, and see if his cheeping increases. Be sure to send for me when it does. I had really counted you dead, minstrel. Safely in the embrace of the Mussulmen. I forgot your relations with that pagan dog you rescued at Acre. Oh, don't slobber in surprise. The English lady told me about it."

Sudden anger bit through pain. "If Joanna had wits or courage she'd tell your guests the identity of the man—"

He struck me silent, then laughed. "We made a bargain. Her life in return for a closed mouth. Were you her lover, minstrel? She hinted of it. That's another delight you can contemplate as you make love to the little stones. She'll crawl into my bed before I'm done."

He leaned closer. "And perhaps the tower guest won't breathe long either. There are ways to kill a man with flint. But other ways less obvious. One final word. If you think these grinning fools who labor down here care about the man in the tower—" he was speaking French now, not his guttural native tongue, "—they don't. All they care about is their work. I looked long and hard to find them. Enjoy their company."

With a mocking salute he tramped back up the winding stair, pausing only to shout back through the wicket, "Perhaps I'll let the lady visit you. Would you like that, knowing I'll soon put her on her back?"

His laugh sang eerily as the lid was closing again.

Before the box ripped much more flesh from my back, the mindless sots who saw to my torture dragged me out. One held a wine-skin. He sloshed the contents over my head.

The stuff trickled into the wounds on my backside and made me close my teeth on my tongue until I tasted blood. I was handed a pair of befouled breeches.

The torturers led me to a doorway hidden behind the great curve of the rack. Thrust through this opening, I tumbled headlong into a small windowless cell where a stub of tallow burned in a basin. The torturers retreated. They took positions near the rack, folding their arms.

I raised myself on hands and knees. My ears rang. I must show no sign of weakness to this woman before whose skirts I crawled.

Joanna was paler than ever. She said stiffly to a guard behind her, "Be so good as to let us close the door and have some privacy."

The lout replied that he'd be happy to retire out of earshot, but he had orders to keep us in a clear view at all times, so she didn't pass me a knife or some other tool of suicide. He retreated beyond the grating of the cell's outer door.

"Go away," I croaked at her. "I can't stand the sight of your scheming face."

"I knew you'd accuse me." She dropped to her knees beside me. "Won't you believe I came because I love you? Your back—"

When she touched it I screamed and toppled over, unable to control my shuddering. With her help I struggled upright again.

"My lady, didn't you beg your fine host to spare your life?"

"You must understand it was a necessary bargain."

"I understand—" A violent fit of coughing. "—understand only that you accompanied the King to betray him."

"Ah, God, Blondel, even with your back nearly broken, you're the same stubborn, proud man I came to love in—"

"Don't debase the word 'love', you whore."

"Blondel, the reason I agreed to keep the Baron's secret—" She lowered her voice when she noticed the prying eye of the guard. "—was in the hope that if I did, the Baron would come to take my silence for granted, relax his watch on me

and give me a chance to slip away to carry word to Elinor in Aquitaine."

"How can you keep up such lies, Joanna? You betrayed Richard to them at Burgundy's insistence."

She nodded slowly. At last I'd heard the truth. But I was unprepared for the whole of it.

"I began with the intention of betraying him, I didn't end with it. The fates, or whatever dark powers rule this frightful world, intervened."

"God's name! I'll have no more of your trickery!"

I would have struck her, but my legs served me badly and I pitched over again, near to fainting. When I recovered, Joanna had cradled my head in her lap. I hated the touch of her arms, so gentle now and afraid to wound, yet possessing a comforting warmth I couldn't deny.

My cheek was damp. I saw in the tallow's feeble gleam that she was crying.

"Blondel, all you say is true, but you must hear the rest."

Under death's hovering wing men and women lose much of their petty pretense, returning to essential things. And the emotion welling in me now, unreasonable but strong as wine, was love for this frail girl whom I knew I should despise.

Her voice became oddly quiet. "The truth is as you tell it, and yet it isn't. I did betray you in Acre. Remember the night in Hugh's palace when you lay in wait to kill him?"

"I could scarcely forget it. It was the night of my first mistake."

"Hush and hear me out. Did you spy a light far down the hallway? That was the Duke. If you thought you were seen, you were right. He didn't dare meet you face to face. He's a coward. I know it for certain at last, when it's too late to help. Hugh sent me into his rooms to save his own life."

"Then you weren't finished with him at all."

"Understand that a woman—any woman, high or low—is a creature easily swayed. That night I thought I was in love with Hugh. I'd thought so for many a month. I'd have done anything for him. After what happened that night I began

to change. To doubt him. Laugh, curse me, it's of little matter now, but you touched something Hugh never could, nor any coward. Afterward I still did what he asked because I was uncertain and weak. Hugh encouraged our affair, hoping to learn private information about Richard's plans. He was disappointed."

"Not when it came to murdering the overlord of Tyre."

"Ah, you'll twist everything out of order before I finish. I can't set things straight with you unless I tell it the way it happened. The Duke's protest over being forced to remain in the Holy Land was only partially feigned. He was under orders from Philip of France to make sure, if at all possible, that Richard's effort to reach Jerusalem failed. Thus Hugh sought out the Templars and Hospitallers. He persuaded them to persuade the King in turn that no successful campaign could be waged against the Holy City."

"But you told Hugh about my mission to Tyre."

"Yes, Blondel."

She was silent a moment. From far away came a lonely trickling noise, water leading through the foundations of the donjon, each falling drop a tick of time measuring the approach of death.

"That was the only piece of valuable information Hugh ever got from me. If I'd thought it would bring him to arrange an assassination—"

"Didn't he tell you the plan?"

"No. But everyone knew of Conrad's difficulties with the Old Man of the Mountains. The blackening of Richard's reputation was too perfect to have been accidental. While all these things were happening I was falling in love with you. Not even when I married Pembroke and first tasted love was I stirred the way you stirred me. Go on, twitch your mouth in derision but it's true. I love you."

Her fingers closed about my arm. "Blondel, believe m. If the gates of Triffels were to open for us somehow, I'd go with you anywhere, with no thought of the past."

I was torn worse than that wooden instrument of hell could ever tear me, because I wanted to believe. "With

the gates of Triffels shut forever, there's not much risk in any words. Finish what you came to say so the torturers can get their work done."

Rapidly she told the rest of it. How, following my imprisonment after Conrad's death, she had thought me surely a dead man. She turned in weakness back to Hugh of Burgundy. At his suggestion she agreed to offer to accompany Richard as his wife, and reveal his identity to Philip's men in Marseilles.

"The scales fell from my eyes at last in Corfu. When I saw Richard's bravery in the face of pirate attack, I saw also how treacherous Burgundy was. And I too. I told him everything. At first he was enraged. Then he was forgiving, and I became his friend. Together we changed plans and arranged for Toscar to sail us north, away from Marseilles."

During the following weeks the party had journeyed north from Venice. They were set upon by brigands on the lower slopes of the Alps. By the time the King reached the little village of Eedburg, a short way from Vienna, all his servants had run away and he was impoverished except for his ruby thumb ring.

To purchase food and lodging he sold the ring. A sharp moneylender recognized it. Leopold himself rode to the inn with a hundred knights and took Richard prisoner after a brief struggle.

"Leopold sent us here in Sturmwulf's keeping," Joanna finished, "Until Richard is stripped of his lands, his crown and all his power."

"How does he fare in the tower?" I asked.

"He's treated well enough. Sturmwulf and the others fear him despite their boasting. He is, after all, a monarch under the favor of the Pope. But the illness he suffered at Acre left him weak. The long journey and the winter chill haven't helped either. He was wounded in the side, fighting Leopold's men at Eedburg. Despite the ministrations of a surgeon the wound has festered and weakened him even further."

"Do you know if Leopold plans to kill him?"

"I can't be sure," she answered wearily. "Prince John and Philip have offered Leopold a hundred and fifty thousand silver marks if they'll keep Richard hidden away until Michaelmas. By then, so Sturmwulf brags, John will have England and Richard's lands in France will fall."

Another memory thrust up. "The blue baldric. It appeared in Rome."

"Stolen by the brigands I mentioned, along with all our baggage. It was an evil night when we stopped in Eedburg. If Leopold and Sturmwulf had their way, Richard would be slain outright."

"Why should they hesitate? No one knows Richard is their prisoner or—"

I was wracked by more coughing. It brought the torturers running. Joanna dismissed them but the guard in the outer corridor was growing impatient. He indicated our time had run out.

I managed to stand up and look at Joanna a last time. I wished to Almighty God, who had been a stranger to me these many years, that my sodden brain could be illuminated with His wisdom. Then I could know her true feelings as well as I knew mine.

Regardless of her treachery, I was damned to love her forever.

I repeated again my question about the King's safety. Joanna whispered, "Two things stop them from killing him. Henry VI, the Holy Roman Emperor, is willing to enjoy the fruits of Leopold's plot, but not the bitter core. He won't sanction murder. Sturmwulf flies into a rage because of it. And Pope Celestine has threatened to excommunicate Richard's captors whoever and wherever they are. But there are other ways—"

"No riddles, Joanna. Do they mean to strike him or don't they?"

"Not so they'll be held guilty. Sturmwulf visits the King at least once a day to bait him. He wants Richard to joust."

"Joust! If Richard's as weak as you—"

"He'll die," she finished bleakly. "But he will have accepted the challenge of his own doing. Sturmwulf's hands will be clean."

"My lady—"

"Damn you, Blondel, never say that again when I love you so much."

I bent close to her ear and breathed one word.

"Escape?"

Her shoulders sagged. "I would have do so long ago if it were possible. I bargained with Sturmwulf because of that hope. It's futile."

The bolt on the outer door was pulled aside with a clank.

"My lady, I'll be severely punished unless I return you to the Baron at once."

"A moment more," Joanna begged. "Please."

Seeing her tearful face, the guard nodded unhappily and retired.

"Blondel, if I could spare you the horror of this place, I would. I'll carry the guilt of Richard's fate to my tomb, but it won't be half so bad as the guilt from what I did to you. Richard's brother and best—"

"My God, Joanna, have you gone insane?"

She gestured helplessly. "It's too late for deception. I know it's a guarded secret, but surely you must have sensed Richard was your half-brother and you—"

"When did you learn this?"

The guard came in, scowling. He would brook no more delays.

"Goodbye, Blondel. No matter what they do—" She could barely speak for weeping. "I love you."

With a thud the cell door shut.

"Joanna? *Joanna!*" I screamed her name, hoping the guard would take pity and return her a moment. He did not. The torturers fell on me and dragged me howling past the rack, to yet another rendezvous with the *chambre a crucit.*

CHAPTER XX

I HAD a last interview with King Richard in the cloudy bathhouse of Triffels, the morning he was to die.

A few days earlier—let me begin again. The term 'day' is misleading. In that black torture box, day and night were the same. But Sturmwulf had paid me another visit. He ordered his donjon lackeys to leave off their abuse and return me, if possible, to a semblance of health.

I couldn't believe Christian grace had suddenly infused his spirit. I wasn't wrong.

"Your King has accepted my invitation to joust. The tourney will be held in a week. Leopold is coming, and the Holy Roman Emperor as well." Sturmwulf spat to indicate his opinion of the latter. "Naturally the King realizes his identity must be kept a secret. None will know who faces me in the lists, except that it's a famous knight who has ridden here to test my arm."

"Why don't you just stab him and be done?"

Sturmwulf's blue eyes danced. "To be sure that's what we'd like. The success of the invasion depends on Richard's absence. But the Emperor is a pusillanimous rogue. He knows how we mean to dispose of the King, but he's concerned about the Pope. In a week's time he'll only be concerned about the stink of one more corpse in the lists."

I had no ready answer. In times past my tongue had the power to goad him to a frenzy, but it lacked that power now. He told me, "I'm restoring you to health, minstrel, so you may watch your King perish."

Crash, and the donjon doors shut on him again.

The torturers, accompanied by an astrologer who passed himself off as a physician, carried me from the vault to the adjoining cell. They laid me on a pallet. The healer set to work with ointments and strips of linen. The ointments burned, and the cure was almost worse than none at all.

I raved and ranted in fever, rising occasionally to gnaw a gobbet of meat or slop down a cup of wine, until that morning when I woke to hear a distant brazen sound. It must have been loud indeed to penetrate this far. I sat up in the dark. My limbs were stiff but the medicaments had done their work. After a time I was able to stand upright with little pain.

I listened, finally recognizing the brazen noise. Long trumpets, blasting in chorus. It was the tourney day.

I was given clean jerkin and hose and a generous meal to dull my last aches. I was then taken in custody by a band of Sturmwulf's knights who conveyed me to the bailey.

I nearly dropped over at the burst of sun in my eyes. The distant pine slopes were shot through with new green below a clear blue sky. The colorful pennons of chivalry flew over Triffels.

The bailey was crowded with liveried servants. I spied the tourney field through the gate, a broad green meadow where striped pavilions had been raised at each end of the lists. To one side of the field was a vast stand, already thronged with nobles and their ladies. From the stand's topmost staff snapped the colors of the Holy Roman Emperor.

My captors said I was to see an unknown knight. I concealed my surprise as they hustled me to the steaming entrance of the castle bathhouse. I was sure Sturmwulf had arranged the meeting to turn the rack another notch. The wild words Joanna had spoken about brotherhood buzzed in my head as I passed through Richard's guard of Teutonic knights, into the bathhouse proper.

With a sound as solid and final as the chunk of a headsman's axe, the oak door closed. Steam clouds boiled from huge hogsheads of water heated by pipes that ran from a

cellar. Through the steam I perceived the King, sitting alone on one of the rude plank washing benches.

I shuddered at the sight he made. He was no less a monarch for being stripped of all his clothing but a sort of quilted robe about his shanks. He was very thin and tired. The badge of his weakness was a massive cloth wrapped round and round his lower chest, dark with dried blood and the discoloration of draining poisons. Water bubbled in the casks, and we might have been two dead men meeting in limbo.

I bent the knee. He laid a kind, firm hand on my shoulder.

"There's no need for ceremony, Blondel. We're quite alone. I'm granted that favor in return for letting the Baron gut me. Make sure we enjoy our privacy by bolting the outer door."

I did so, then faced him. "My tongue is slow since I wasn't sure you'd welcome seeing me."

"Because of Conrad's death? I was wrong to blame you. The circumstances were explained to me in Corfu by Lady Pembroke. She's a worthy woman, Blondel, for it's not whether a human being is weak and occasionally swayed by evil passions, but whether, in extreme circumstances they finally refuse to be swayed by them." His mouth quirked. "Permit me this speechmaking in lieu of a funeral oration. Joanna loves you."

We sat together not as monarch and vassal but as—the tormenting enigma—brothers. Somehow I couldn't raise the question. My eyes were drawn to a pile of armor, a heavy Austrian head casque and a broadsword lying nearby. He noticed my interest.

"The armor is a present from Sturmwulf. Fine equipment for a tourney."

"He plans to kill you and you know it. Why do you gratify him?"

"I must speak a tired word, Blondel. A word men often profane. Honor. I have no heart for fighting him. Not

much strength either. Still, I prefer to die now rather than languish in a tower until I'm an old man."

In the heavy silence, trumpets rang again, the pattern of notes signifying that the less celebrated first jousts were starting on the greensward. The King sighed.

"I do lose heart a little when I think that in an hour or less, it will be finished and John will be King in my stead." He gazed earnestly through the blowing steam. "I wish you were my brother in full Blondel. Although you've lived a minstrel's life, you're far more fit to rule than he."

The agony of now knowing overcame me. "My liege, I don't want to speak of forbidden things, but in the donjon Lady Joanna said—"

"That we are half-brothers? It's true."

I must have goggled at the enormity of it. For the first time Richard managed to smile.

"Why do you imagine I was moved to protect you from Burgundy that night on Cyprus? By rights he should have claimed your life. And again in Tyre. If you hadn't been my kinsman, and blood stronger than any kingly vow, you'd have died for Conrad's murder."

A shocking thought jarred me. I stared past Richard's shoulder.

"What troubles you, Blondel?"

"That broadsword with the armor. I just realized it was your own."

"At least that wasn't stolen on my journey. But what about your curiosity? Surely a minstrel doesn't learn he's the brother of a King every day."

"That's true, true," I said quickly, hoping to cover any hint of the scheme that had just suggested itself. "Your pardon. It's a touch of dizziness from the attentions of Sturmwulf's donjon staff."

Richard frowned. "Have they served you ill?"

"No, no. Tell me about this strange news I learned from Joanna."

"I thought long ago you might have guessed, because of the way we always seemed the closest of friends. Remember

my betrothal to ugly little Alice of France when I was hardly old enough to sit a saddle? Then you must remember also that my father, Henry II, took her for a mistress. She bore him a son. I think I may have told you. I refused to marry Alice because I knew of that son. Does the pattern come clear?"

"It does," I answered, overwhelmed with the strangeness of it.

"My mother is a proud woman," he went on, in a rather melancholy way. "She refused to let our father acknowledge his rightful bastard. King Philip, too, knew there was a child. He didn't know the child's name or whereabouts. Our father deliberately concealed both, partly because my mother was so jealous, partly because he feared Philip might have the child killed. Its very existence blocked the marriage Philip wanted to arrange."

"And the de Nesles were really not my parents?"

"Rolfe de Nesle was the father of the Rolfe who was your cousin. Old Rolfe died soon after his wife bore the boy. She promised to care for you as well, and give you the family name to share, at our father's request."

Another blast of trumps from the lists reminded us that royal blood could spill as easily as any other kind. The knowledge lent a sad urgency to Richard's words.

"The story of your birth wasn't revealed to me until I was a young man. Elinor made me swear a sacred vow never to allow evidence of the birth come to light. A fine woman, my mother, but too narrow and proud and idealistic for this bloody century. We made an agreement. I would keep silent about the secret only if I were allowed to watch over my younger half-brother the rest of his life. I'd already found him a worthier companion than John, who was more legitimately my kin."

"Many things are clear now," I said.

"Because I knew you were the son of an English king," he said, "I spoke out in bad temper too often. I wanted greater things for you than being a footloose poet."

"Rightly, Richard," I said, daring the name for the first time.

"No. I was wrong. In Sturmwulf's tower I've had much time to ponder past follies. Trying to make you something you aren't was my error, not yours. I knew it when I compared your loyalty and good heart to those of men of title and wealth like Sturmwulf and Burgundy and Duke Leopold. Birth can't make a man noble if it's not in his nature. Neither can a fool's rags forever hide a valiant spirit. Each man has to be what he is. Some turn out better than others, but not necessarily according to the way the world classifies them. Were there no kings to bring order, this earth would be in a poor way. Were there no singers, it would be dead."

A moment later he added, "When I heard your voice below the tower, before the guards silenced my response, I knew the full depth of your faith and courage."

"But I've failed. I wanted to carry news of you to your mother."

"And I wish you had," he returned. "Not for the reason you imagine. She might have looked more favorably upon you. I'd hoped one day to make her relent, to let me grant you a modest title. Then you could have claimed Joanna with no false barriers standing between. I say again, Joanna does love you. I saw the truth in her eyes when she made her confession at Corfu. She said—"

My heart was breaking at the thought of how I must seem to betray him again, and I was unprepared for the hammer of a fist on the bathhouse door.

"Sir Knight, the Baron is waiting in the lists."

Richard stood up and clasped my hand.

"Time. Goodbye, brother."

He turned, legs unsteady and fresh blood breaking through the linen about his middle. I hardened my heart and pushed against his back.

The King fell on hands and knees. I ran past him to the pile of armor and seized his great sword. His shout was muffled by more beating on the door.

"Sir Knight, do you need our assistance? Answer!"

I murmured a plea for Richard's forgiveness, which he never heard because I swung the broadsword at his head.

CHAPTER XXI

NOT WITH the death edge but with the flat did I strike him. He toppled on his face into water leaking beneath the wooden bench. I held my teeth together and plunged the sword into my left leg.

Blood spurted and mingled with the trickling water. Outside the knights set up a fearsome clamor. Only the iron bolt stopped their entrance and gave me the precious moments I needed.

The cut in my leg bled its redness all down my hose. That was what I wanted. Quickly as I could, I stripped off my clothes and pulled them onto Richard's naked limbs. The King was breathing lightly. I dragged him to a distant corner near one of the hogsheads and dumped him on his belly with the bloodied hose sticking toward the door.

I used a strip of the linen with which he'd covered himself after bathing to bind my leg and stanch the flow. Then I tipped over a pair of benches and cried out. "Murder! Murder!"

I shouted more oaths while snatching up Richard's undertunic. As I worked it over my head the oaths were appropriately muffled. The fearful knights began to throw their weight against the door.

Did I have enough time to don full armor and bring off the deception? It seemed impossible, yet desperation pours a strange liquor into a man's blood, and makes his hands fly faster than normal. This was my last chance. There would be no reprieve.

I pulled on the hauberk, slung the baldric over my shoulder and fastened the scabbard in place. Wearing the stifling iron casque, only my eyes showed. I had been shouting and knocking over benches regularly to make sounds of a struggle. The broadsword still gleamed with fresh blood as I stumbled to the door and opened the bolt.

"What sort of madman did you bring to me?" I lurched against Sturmwulf's knights as though out of breath. They gaped at the sprawled form across the bathhouse, all but its bloody hose obscured in the whirling steam. "He fell on me with a hidden dagger."

"See that the jackal is properly dispatched," ordered the leader of the knights.

"Stay!" I shouted. "His blood's on this blade. I rammed his guts."

They hesitated, perhaps suspicious of my tones, but unable to tell much because a casque lent any voice a distorted, booming quality. In other circumstances the crude ruse would have stood no chance of success, but the knights were clearly upset about incurring their master's displeasure, and the imperious trumpets reinforced their delay. If they saw the face of that man lying in the murk—

I waited, my heart tight in my chest and my cheeks running with sweat under the casque. Grumbling a remark in the Teuton tongue, one of the knights disobeyed his leader's command and clanked toward Richard.

The flimsy trick had failed. I would be discovered. My brother and I would die before—

With a rattle of hooves and clank of iron, a mailed knight thundered under the portcullis and pulled his snorting beast up by the bathhouse. At the last moment the inquisitive knight faced around to hear the new arrival say:

"Baron Sturmwulf promised three turns of the rack for each moment more of delay."

"But the minstrel attacked this knight!" one began.

"It's no concern of mine whether the Archangel himself attacked! I merely relay a message. Bring the stranger to the lists or suffer the consequences."

He wheeled his mount and pounded away down the hillside to the green field and the colored tents. The commander of the escort party didn't deliberate long. He raised his sword to indicate some grooms holding armored horses near the gate.

I turned and walked. I dared not look around. If one of the knights went back—

That walk across the mud of the bailey was long as time itself. I bit my lip to hide a groan as I was handed to the saddle of a great bay and given a lance. I seated it on my right hand in the pouch near the stirrup. Next a groom presented me with a shield. I slipped the thongs across my left arm. Richard's sword rested in the scabbard again. The other knights talked while they mounted. I counted them.

The first play in the game had been won.

The great bay stired under me. I took the reins and rode through the portcullis and down the green hillside. A warm breeze blew. If I stumbled or showed any clumsiness, I would be lost.

At the near end of the lists a pavilion had been set up for the use of the unknown visiting knight. Three surly squires saw to the checking of my accoutrements. I tried to remember how Richard and I had tilted lances in our youth. I also tried to forget how I had never stayed a horse successfully against him.

A curious strength flooded me, born of remembering that the mailed figure mounted on a russet stallion at the far end of the green was responsible for Zoe's death.

Only a minute remained before the trumpets would signal the first charge. Spring sunlight flashed on Sturmwulf's blue casque. His lance butt was already in his hand. In the packed stand I picked out the resplendent figure of Duke

Leopold, seated beside an even more resplendent, but smaller, almost toadish man. Near them, in a yellow gown, was Joanna.

All in all, a colorful and sporting scene, flags whipping out in the warm wind, the grass greening, a martial click and clatter rising from the knights who jockeyed for a place to watch on either side of the timbered lists.

The toadish man gestured. From his position of prominence I assumed him to be the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI. The heralds lifted their horns and sounded the brass call to death.

I tugged my beast's rein. He started forward. Sturmwulf's lance dipped to position, his russet horse already thundering fast. I was afraid.

I would die here in the green light of spring. My whole soul rebelled. Too late.

I struggled to hold my lance straight. The point of Sturmwulf's flew toward me like a juggernaut. At the last moment I remembered to fling up my shield.

The Baron's lance glanced off with a muffled clang. I swayed and held on as the horses passed. Mingled cries of approval for Sturmwulf's pass and shock at the poor showing made by the unknown knight rose from the stand.

I wheeled the bay, ignoring the taunts of the squires outside Sturmwulf's tent. I sent the beast into a charge while Sturmwulf was still making his turn, hoping thus to gain the advantage.

Hoofs chopped the greensward. Sweat rivered my cheeks and soaked my body under the mail. Sturmwulf lowered his head and forced his russet stallion into a faster gallop.

Closer the tips of the lances came.

Closer.

And *closer*—

This time I had misjudged. Sturmwulf's lance dove beneath my shield into my guts, spinning the sky and green earth. My bay slid against the timbers, reared and threw me.

An excited exclamation went up from the assembled company. I floundered. Striking the breastplate of Sturm-

wulf's stallion, my lance had snapped. My shield lay off to the left.

The bay cantered away to champ grass. Strumwulf laughed as he leaped to the ground. My leg was hot with running blood. I went for the shield and stumbled. Strumwulf kicked the shield. It went sailing beyond reach.

He waited. Sunlight glinted on his casque. His sword was in his right fist, his shield on his left arm.

I rose to meet him. Mockingly he saluted me.

"This is the famous Melech-Ric?" Only the two of us could hear the words. "I am disappointed, mighty king, to kill you so easily." And he threw his whole mailed body upon me.

His broadsword chopped for the point of least protection, where my casque met my hauberk at the neck. I flung up my blade. Steel clanged steel. Blue sparks crackled.

Sturmwulf thrust beneath my blade. I parried, then again. I kept moving my leg because it was ready to buckle.

Again he laid about with the broadsword, again. Each time I fended the mighty swipe with more difficulty. Each collision of steel shocked my arm and made my head ache. Death was close to me, breathing as fast as Sturmwulf himself.

My last parry was crooked. Sturmwulf's steel clanked off my casque, knocking me on my back. He straddled me and thrust his sword against my neck.

"My your journey to hell be a pleasant one, King Richard."

Then I remembered my final weapon.

"You're cheated, Sturmwulf. It's not a king you've beaten, but a fool."

Sturmwulf's hand trembled. "Damned demons of the pit! That voice isn't—"

"The King's? No, lord. I'm Blondel."

A howl of rage issued from his blue casque. That bellow silenced the throng. I srambled out from under his sword. I wanted to weep from pain, but instead I laughed, a sound like a death's rattle. Bringing up my blade, I retreated a little. I would use a different knife to prick him.

"Come, Baron! Surely it can't be so hard for a wolf to kill a mouse of the field. Or is the wolf even afraid of mice?"

Screaming, he ran at me. His sword was guarded not by thought but by wild anger. I stepped around quickly and brought my own sword down on his.

Sturmwulf rocked with the blow. If only my leg didn't betray me and crumble.

"You can spit a capon Baron, or carry a girl to death. But that takes no courage. Careful! Don't show your guests that against a man you have to strike from behind."

"Whore's droppings! Maggot of hell!"

He swung time after time, trying to hack to oblivion the sound of my voice.

"I'll sing a song when you're dead, Baron, the song of the wolf and the mouse, the yellow-backed wolf who couldn't crash—"

My left leg buckled.

Both hands locked on the sword hilt, Sturmwulf threw the blade back over his head to split my skull in half. He towered against the sun. The great iron blade started down. I yelled to him, "Have a care, yellow wolf!"

His monumental rage twisted his hands the slightest bit, but it was enough. The sword drew sparks from the side of my casque and buried itself in the earth next to my shoulder.

For a second he was bent over. I raised Richard's sword and rammed it between hauberk and casque into his throat.

I rolled away to escape his blood, a scarlet gush across the sun. When I looked again flies were already buzzing at his eye slit.

After a moment I dragged to my feet. I walked with shaking step to the canopy. Duke Leopold and the Emperor were speechless at the sudden turn of events. I might as well gamble for everything.

I unfastened the casque and knelt before the little toad Emperor. He was fiddling with his furred cape and casting

worried glances at Leopold, rigid beside him. A tense silence hung over the green field.

The Emperor coughed and did what he must, gesturing with his gold mace.

"Rise, Sir Knight, and accept the chaplet of victory."

I stood up, wavering a little as I took off my helm.

"I am not a knight, or even Richard of England, whom the Baron expected to die today."

A thunderbolt could have struck them and the result would have been no more profound. The Emperor gulped and shrivelled in his chair. Leopold turned white. His ringed hand leaped to his enamelled sword pommel. The Emperor's guilt—or at least his consent to courtly murder—was plain on his face. But a rising murmur from the lords and ladies who had not known the knight's identity shook him. Celestine's name was whispered, and there was mention of a merchant in the tower, and of excommunication.

"Your Grace," I said to the Emperor, "now that the guests know who is being held at Triffels, the wrath of the Holy See cannot be long in descending. I changed places with the king because he was too enfeebled to fight. I am certain Your Grace would never have sanctioned the joust had you known the circumstances."

The runty little Emperor's muddy eyes flickered and brightened as he glimpsed the door I had unlocked for him. He fingered his mace nervously and replied "The words are true, Sir Knight. We did not realize it was Richard entering the lists, nor even that he was a prisoner here. His whereabouts have been a mystery to us."

Leopold signalled his men at arms. "Kill him."

Down the steps rushed half a dozen armed assassins, held back only by the Emperor's feeble cry:

"No, good Duke! Stay them a moment."

Biting his lips in fury, Leopold obeyed. Joanna had risen. It was hard to tell which shone the brighter, her fair hair or the naked knives waiting until the Emperor decided whether I should live or die. I gave him no chance to delib-

erate. As long as I could stand upright, I might press hard and win.

"The boon I ask for vanquishing Sturmwulf is freedom to ride west to Aquitaine. I'll seek the ransom money from the King's mother Elinor. I also ask a guarantee of safe conduct from the Emperor's own hand. Else—" I flung a glance at Leopold, "—else those who plotted murder will have to kill me, and then the King who lies fainting in the castle bathhouse this moment, and then perhaps some lords and ladies as well."

Joanna stepped forward quickly to kneel. "That is so, Your Grace. Richard's enemies have gone too far, whoever they may be."

Thank God for her wits. She saw the delicacy of the scheme and did not upset it. With false piety the Emperor said, "It's a shocking plot. Duke Leopold, did you know the identity of the Baron's foe?" The toad eyes warned Leopold that the answer had better be correct.

Leopold bit his lips more furiously than ever. "Naturally not, Your Grace."

"Where are my retainers? Send them to the castle. See whether it's true the English king lies unconscious."

In a matter of moments his flunkies returned to report that an auburn-haired stranger who claimed to be Lion Heart was binding up his own dented head in the bathhouse and demanding to know the whereabouts of his minstrel Blondel.

The Emperor blanched. "Bring seals and parchment. This man must go free."

"And the lady," I said.

"I beg Blondel's pardon," said Joanna. "I'll remain here, to look after the King's person and see that no harm comes to him until he's ransomed."

"Remain if you wish," said Henry VI. "The King's safety is guaranteed. We do not wish to offend the Holy See. We personally promise that Duke Leopold will guard him, and be held fully responsible in the event of a disaster. Since Sturmwulf was your liegeman, Duke, it's only fair you as-

sume the guilt of any unhappy accidents that might befall before the ransoming."

"There will be no accidents." Leopold muttered wrathfully. Both men had lackluster eyes, as if suddenly seeing a dream of conquest crumble. I would have laughed had I the strength.

Joanna's eyes shone, weary but no longer afraid. A scribe wrote and sanded the Emperor's letter of passage. As I prepared to take leave the little toad man hitched himself higher on the velvet chair. Though he had watched a private vision of glory destroyed, his ugly brown eyes still managed a glint of admiration that I thought was genuine.

"You're a brave man, minstrel. Would that we had men like you serving us." Leopold colored and stared at the sky. "Would too that all men who profess chivalry were guided by similar bravery."

Then frustrated greed got the better of him and he waved. "Take yourself away."

I knelt and thanked him, turned and trudged to the pavilion. The squires were more respectful now. They stripped away my garments, stanched the flow of blood with a yellow unguent, bound the leg again and helped me into a suit of journeyman's clothes fetched from the castle. They would have taken Richard's sword but I held them back.

"That I'll carry with me to Queen Elinor as proof that her son lives. Give me a hand up."

In spite of dizziness and a ringing in my ears I was enjoying my moment of victory. It was enhanced by the appearance of Joanna. She had followed me across the green and stood at my stirrup. This time I had no doubt about what her eyes told me.

"Ride safely, Blondel. And when you come back from Aquitaine, we'll go together, wherever you wish."

"But you're still a lady of high station."

"I renounce that willingly. I'm a woman first."

Leaning down to her red mouth, I thought of Richard's remark about one day granting me a title.

"Perhaps there'll be no renunciaton after all. Time will tell. I often forget I'm a king's kin."

I savored the sweetness of her lips promising new hope for England when Richard's return swept John from power, a new life for the both of us.

Riding out, I lost her from sight behind the gay pavilions. Before the bending of the highway hid the walls of Triffels, I had a glimpse of another figure in a long linen gown, tall and mighty, leaning upon two of Leopold's knights by the castle portcullis. A kingly hand was raised against the blue sky, in salute and farewell. In that gesture I found peace.

Not far from Triffels I came upon an inn. I secured wine and provisions for the journey, and sat a while in the sun until the dizziness passed. Then I mounted and rode west again into the green spring of Europe.

Before many a league had passed, I was singing as I rode.

There's romance, adventure, excitement in these

ACE HISTORICAL NOVELS

D-523 (35¢) STRIKE THE BLACK FLAG by Jay Scotland
A full cargo of thrills, with Blackbeard, Anne Bonny, the pirate queen, and a hold full of rascals, renegades, and handsome sea rovers.

G-352 (50¢) FIRE AND MORNING by Francis Leary
"Bright with a blaze of color and pageantry," wrote the *New York Times* of this superior novel of the War of the Roses and Richard III.

D-435 (35¢) LADY IN BONDAGE by C. T. Ritchie
A vivid tale of a young English noblewoman sold into captivity in the New World, and the man who sought to liberate her.

G-402 (50¢) KIBOKO by Daniel P. Mannix
"Kiboko is the name for the rhinoceros-hide whip that slave drivers used to tame East Africa and it is symbolic of the stinging, lashing narrative."
—Los Angeles Herald-Examiner

D-426 (35¢) PENAL COLONY by Robert S. Close
"Pungent, vivid and believable . . . has enough sex and excitement to make for very good reading."
—New Orleans Times-Picayune

Ask your newsdealer for them. If sold out, these novels can be bought by sending the listed price (plus 5¢ handling costs) for each title to ACE BOOKS, INC. (Sales Dept.), 23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N.Y.

KING'S MINSTREL– KING'S AVENGER

Into the bloody turbulence of the Third Crusade rode Blondel, minstrel and swordsman, following his master Richard the Lion-Hearted. With a nose for adventure, an eye to rise above his station, and a passion for a high-born woman, he found his talents pitted against powerful enemies – not only the Saracens, but a crafty duke and a brutish baron...

Blondel tested his mettle in the heat of battle until he found himself embroiled in his most perilous adventure – the quest for a lost king and the tormenting secret buried at his birth.